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1

The Subject of Freedom

Over the last two decades, a key question has occupied many feminist theorists: how should issues of historical and cultural specificity inform both the analytics and the politics of any feminist project? While this question has led to serious attempts at integrating issues of sexual, racial, class, and national difference within feminist theory, questions regarding religious difference have remained relatively unexplored. The vexing relationship between feminism and religion is perhaps most manifest in discussions of Islam. This is due in part to the historically contentious relationship that Islamic societies have had with what has come to be called "the West," but also due to the challenges that contemporary Islamist movements pose to secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part. The suspicion with which many feminists tended to view Islamist movements only intensified in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks launched against the United States, and the immense groundswell of anti-Islamic sentiment that has followed since. If supporters of the Islamist movement were disliked before for their social conservatism and their rejection of liberal values (key among them "women's freedom"), their now almost taken-for-granted association with terrorism has served to further reaffirm their status as agents of a dangerous irrationality.

Women's participation in, and support for, the Islamist movement provokes strong responses from feminists across a broad range of the political spectrum. One of the most common reactions is the supposition that women Islamist supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan, who, if freed from their

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bondage, would naturally express their instinctual abhorrence for the traditional Islamic mores used to enchain them. Even those analysts who are skeptical of the false-consciousness thesis underpinning this approach nonetheless continue to frame the issue in terms of a fundamental contradiction: why would such a large number of women across the Muslim world actively support a movement that seems inimical to their "own interests and agendas," especially at a historical moment when these women appear to have more emancipatory possibilities available to them?[1] Despite important differences between these two reactions, both share the assumption that there is something intrinsic to women that *should* predispose them to oppose the practices, values, and injunctions that the Islamist movement embodies. Yet, one may ask, is such an assumption valid? What is the history by which we have come to assume its truth? What kind of a political imagination would lead one to think in this manner? More importantly, if we discard such an assumption, what other analytical tools might be available to ask a different set of questions about women's participation in the Islamist movement?

In this book I will explore some of the conceptual challenges that women's involvement in the Islamist movement poses to feminist theory in particular, and to secular-liberal thought in general, through an ethnographic account of an urban women's mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic Revival in Cairo, Egypt. For two years (1995–97) I conducted fieldwork with a movement in which women from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds provided lessons to one another that focused on the teaching and studying of Islamic scriptures, social practices, and forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self.[2] The burgeoning of this movement marks the first time in Egyptian history that such a large number of women have held public meetings in mosques to teach one another Islamic doctrine, thereby altering the historically male-centered character of mosques as well as Islamic pedagogy. At the same time, women's religious participation within such public arenas of Islamic pedagogy is critically structured by, and serves to uphold, a discursive tradition that regards subordination to a tran-

[1] This dilemma seems to be further compounded by the fact that women's participation in the Islamist movement in a number of countries (such as Iran, Egypt, Indonesia, and Malaysia) is not limited to the poor (that is, those who are often considered to have a "natural affinity" for religion). Instead the movement also enjoys wide support among women from the upper- and middle-income strata.

[2] In addition to attending religious lessons at a number of mosques catering to women of various socioeconomic backgrounds, I undertook participant observation among the teachers and attendees of mosque lessons, in the context of their daily lives. This was supplemented by a year-long study with a shaikh from the Islamic University of al-Azhar on issues of Islamic jurisprudence and religious practice.

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scendent will (and thus, in many instances, to male authority) as its coveted goal.[3]

The women's mosque movement is part of the larger Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening (al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya) that has swept the Muslim world, including Egypt, since at least the 1970s. "Islamic Revival" is a term that refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies. This sensibility has a palpable public presence in Egypt, manifest in the vast proliferation of neighborhood mosques and other institutions of Islamic learning and social welfare, in a dramatic increase in attendance at mosques by both women and men, and in marked displays of religious sociability. Examples of the latter include the adoption of the veil (*ḥijāb*), a brisk consumption and production of religious media and literature, and a growing circle of intellectuals who write and comment upon contemporary affairs in the popular press from a self-described Islamic point of view. Neighborhood mosques have come to serve as the organizational center for many of these activities, from the dissemination of religious knowledge and instruction, to the provision of a range of medical and welfare services to poor Egyptians.[4] This Islamization of the sociocultural landscape of Egyptian society is in large part the work of the piety movement, of which the women's movement is an integral part, and whose activities are organized under the umbrella term *daʿwa* (a term whose historical development I trace in chapter 2).[5]

The women's mosque movement, as part of the Islamic Revival, emerged twenty-five or thirty years ago when women started to organize weekly religious lessons—first at their homes and then within mosques—to read the Quran, the *ḥadīth* (the authoritative record of the Prophet's exemplary speech and actions), and associated exegetical and edificatory literature. By the time I began my fieldwork in 1995, this movement had become so popular that

[3] This is in contrast, for example, to a movement among women in the Islamic republic of Iran that has had as its goal the reinterpretation of sacred texts to derive a more equitable model of relations between Muslim women and men; see Afshar 1998; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Najmabadi 1991, 1998.

[4] According to available sources, the total number of mosques in Egypt grew from roughly 28,000 reported in 1975 to 50,000 in 1985 (Zeghal 1996, 174); by 1995 there were 120,000 mosques in Egypt (al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies 1996, 65). Of the 50,000 mosques tabulated in the year 1985, only 7,000 were established by the government (Gaffney 1991, 47).

[5] There are three important strands that comprise the Islamic Revival: state-oriented political groups and parties, militant Islamists (whose presence has declined during the 1990s), and a network of socioreligious nonprofit organizations that provide charitable services to the poor and perform the work of proselytization. In this book, I will use the terms "the daʿwa movement" and "the piety movement" interchangeably to refer to this network of socioreligious organizations of which the mosque movement is an important subset.

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there were hardly any neighborhoods in this city of eleven million inhabitants that did not offer some form of religious lessons for women.[6] According to participants, the mosque movement had emerged in response to the perception that religious knowledge, as a means of organizing daily conduct, had become increasingly marginalized under modern structures of secular governance. The movement's participants usually describe the impact of this trend on Egyptian society as "secularization" (*ʿalmana* or *ʿalmāniyya*) or "westernization" (*tagharrub*), a historical process which they argue has reduced Islamic knowledge (both as a mode of conduct and a set of principles) to an abstract system of beliefs that has no direct bearing on the practicalities of daily living. In response, the women's mosque movement seeks to educate ordinary Muslims in those virtues, ethical capacities, and forms of reasoning that participants perceive to have become either unavailable or irrelevant to the lives of ordinary Muslims. Practically, this means instructing Muslims not only in the proper performance of religious duties and acts of worship but, more importantly, in how to organize their daily conduct in accord with principles of Islamic piety and virtuous behavior.

Despite its focus on issues of piety, it would be wrong to characterize the women's mosque movement as an abandonment of politics. On the contrary, the form of piety the movement seeks to realize is predicated upon, and transformative of, many aspects of social life.[7] While I will discuss in chapters 2 and 4 the different ways in which the activism of the mosque movement challenges our normative liberal conceptions of politics, here I want to point out the scope of the transformation that the women's mosque movement and the larger piety (daʿwa) movement have effected within Egyptian society. This includes changes in styles of dress and speech, standards regarding what is deemed proper entertainment for adults and children, patterns of financial and household management, the provision of care for the poor, and the terms by which public debate is conducted. Indeed, as the Egyptian government has come to recognize the impact that the mosque movement in particular, and the piety movement in general, have had on the sociocultural ethos of Egyptian public and political life, it has increasingly subjected these movements to state regulation and scrutiny (see chapter 2).

The pious subjects of the mosque movement occupy an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship because they pursue practices and ideals em-

[6] The attendance at these gatherings ranged from ten to five hundred women, depending on the popularity of the teacher.

[7] Unlike some other religious traditions (such as English Puritanism) wherein "piety" refers primarily to inward spiritual states, the mosque participants' use of the Arabic term *taqwa* (which may be translated as "piety") suggests both an inward orientation or disposition and a manner of practical conduct. See my discussion of the term *taqwa* in chapter 4.

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bedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status. Movements such as these have come to be associated with terms such as fundamentalism, the subjugation of women, social conservatism, reactionary atavism, cultural backwardness, and so on—associations that, in the aftermath of September 11, are often treated as "facts" that do not require further analysis. While it would be a worthy task to dissect the reductionism that such associations enact on an enormously complex phenomenon, this is not my purpose in this book. Nor is it my aim to recover a "redeemable element" within the Islamist movement by recuperating its latent liberatory potentials so as to make the movement more palatable to liberal sensibilities. Instead, in this book I seek to analyze the conceptions of self, moral agency, and politics that undergird the practices of this nonliberal movement, in order to come to an understanding of the historical projects that animate it.[8]

My goal, however, is not just to provide an ethnographic account of the Islamic Revival. It is also to make this material speak back to the normative liberal assumptions about human nature against which such a movement is held accountable—such as the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them, and so on. Thus, my ethnographic tracings will sustain a running argument with and against key analytical concepts in liberal thought, as these concepts have come to inform various strains of feminist theory through which movements such as the one I am interested in are analyzed. As will be evident, many of the concepts I discuss under the register of feminist theory in fact enjoy common currency across a wide range of disciplines, in part because liberal assumptions about what constitutes human nature and agency have become integral to our humanist intellectual traditions.

AGENCY AND RESISTANCE

As I suggested at the outset, women's active support for socioreligious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses a dilemma for feminist analysts. On the one hand, women are seen to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres while, on the other hand, the very idioms

[8] For studies that capture the complex character of Islamist movements, and the wide variety of activities that are often lumped under the fundamentalist label, see Abedi and Fischer 1990; Bowen 1993; Esposito 1992; Hefner 2000; Hirschkind 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Peletz 2002; Salvatore 1997; Starrett 1998.

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they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male authority. In other words, women's subordination to feminine virtues, such as shyness, modesty, and humility, appears to be the necessary condition for their enhanced public role in religious and political life. While it would not have been unusual in the 1960s to account for women's participation in such movements in terms of false consciousness or the internalization of patriarchal norms through socialization, there has been an increasing discomfort with explanations of this kind. Drawing on work in the humanities and the social sciences since the 1970s that has focused on the operations of human agency within structures of subordination, feminists have sought to understand how women resist the dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their "own interests and agendas." A central question explored within this scholarship has been: how do women contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it? Scholars working within this framework have thus tended to analyze religious traditions in terms of the conceptual and practical resources they offer to women, and the possibilities for redirecting and recoding these resources in accord with women's "own interests and agendas"—a recoding that stands as the site of women's agency.[9]

When the focus on locating women's agency first emerged, it played a crucial role in complicating and expanding debates about gender in non-Western societies beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy. In particular, the focus on women's agency provided a crucial corrective to scholarship on the Middle East that for decades had portrayed Arab and Muslim women as passive and submissive beings shackled by structures of male authority.[10] Feminist scholarship performed the worthy task of restoring the absent voice of women to analyses of Middle Eastern societies, portraying women as active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested (Abu-Lughod 1986; Altorki 1986; Atiya 1982; S. Davis 1983; Dwyer 1978; Early 1993; Fernea 1985; Wikan 1991). This emphasis on women's agency within gender studies paralleled, to a certain extent, discussions of the peasantry in New Left scholarship, a body of work that also sought to restore a humanist agency (often expressed metonymically as a "voice") to the peasant in the historiography of agrarian societies—a project articulated against classical Marxist formulations that had assigned the peasantry a non-place in the making of modern history (Hobsbawm 1980; James

[9] Examples from the Muslim context include Boddy 1989; Hale 1987; Hegland 1998; MacLeod 1991; Torab 1996. For a similar argument made in the context of Christian evangelical movements, see Brusco 1995; Stacey 1991.

[10] For a review of this scholarship on the Middle East, see Abu-Lughod 1990a.

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Scott 1985). The Subaltern Studies Project is the most recent example of this scholarship (see, for example, Guha and Spivak 1988).[11]

The ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women's agency cannot be emphasized enough, especially when one remembers that Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression. This acknowledgment notwithstanding, it is critical to examine the assumptions and elisions that attend this focus on agency, especially the ways in which these assumptions constitute a barrier to the exploration of movements such as the one I am dealing with here. In what follows, I will explore how the notion of human agency most often invoked by feminist scholars—one that locates agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject—has been brought to bear upon the study of women involved in patriarchal religious traditions such as Islam. Later, in the second half of this chapter, I will suggest alternative ways of thinking about agency, especially as it relates to embodied capacities and means of subject formation.

Janice Boddy's work is an eloquent and intelligent example of the anthropological turn to an analysis of subaltern gendered agency. Boddy conducted fieldwork in a village in an Arabic-speaking region of northern Sudan on a women's *zār* cult—a widely practiced healing cult that uses Islamic idioms and spirit mediums and whose membership is largely female (1989). Through a rich ethnography of women's cultic practices, Boddy proposes that in a society where the "official ideology" of Islam is dominated and controlled by men, the zār practice might be understood as a space of subordinate discourse—as "a medium for the cultivation of women's consciousness" (1989, 345). She argues that zār possession serves as "a kind of counter-hegemonic process . . . : *a feminine response to hegemonic praxis*, and the privileging of men that this ideologically entails, which ultimately escapes neither its categories nor its constraints" (1989, 7; emphasis added). She concludes by asserting that the women she studied "use perhaps unconsciously, perhaps strategically, what we in the West might prefer to consider *instruments of their oppression* as means to assert their value both collectively, through the ceremonies they organize and stage, and individually, in the context of their marriages, so insisting on their dynamic complementarity with men. *This in itself is a means of resisting and setting limits to domination*. . . ." (1989, 345; emphasis added).

The ethnographic richness of this study notwithstanding, what is most relevant for the purposes of my argument is the degree to which the female agent in Boddy's work seems to stand in for a sometimes repressed, sometimes active

[11] It is not surprising, therefore, that in addition to seeking to restore agency to the peasantry, Ranajit Guha, one of the founders of the Subaltern Studies Project, also called for historians to treat women as agents, rather than instruments, of various movements (Guha 1996, 12).

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feminist consciousness, articulated against the hegemonic male cultural norms of Arab Muslim societies.[12] As Boddy's study reveals, even in instances when an explicit *feminist* agency is difficult to locate, there is a tendency among scholars to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination. When women's actions seem to reinscribe what appear to be "instruments of their own oppression," the social analyst can point to moments of disruption of, and articulation of points of opposition to, male authority—moments that are located either in the interstices of a woman's consciousness (often read as a nascent feminist consciousness), or in the objective effects of women's actions, however unintended these may be. Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective). Thus the humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression constitutes the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit.

Lila Abu-Lughod, one of the leading figures among those scholars who helped reshape the study of gender in the Middle East, has criticized some of the assumptions informing feminist scholarship, including those found in her own previous work (Abu-Lughod 1990b, 1993). In one of her earlier works, Abu-Lughod had analyzed women's poetry among the Bedouin tribe of Awlād ʿAli as a socially legitimate, semipublic practice that was an expression of women's resistance and protest against the strict norms of male domination in which Bedouin women live (Abu-Lughod 1986). Later, in a reflective essay on this work, Abu-Lughod asks the provocative question: how might we recognize instances of women's resistance without "misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience—something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics?" (Abu-Lughod 1990b, 47). In exploring this question, Abu-Lughod criticizes herself and others for being too preoccupied with "explaining resistance and finding resisters" at the expense of understanding the workings of power (1990b, 43). She argues:

> In some of my earlier work, as in that of others, there is perhaps a tendency to *romanticize resistance*, to read all forms of resistance as signs of ineffectiveness of systems of power and of *the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated*. By reading resistance in this way, we collapse distinctions between forms of resistance and foreclose certain questions about the workings of power. (1990b, 42; emphasis added)

[12] For a somewhat different approach to women's zar practices in the Sudan, which, nonetheless, utilizes a similar notion of agency, see Hale 1986, 1987.

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As a corrective, Abu-Lughod recommends that resistance be used as a "diagnostic of power" (1990b, 42), to locate the shifts in social relations of power that influence the resisters as well as those who dominate. To illustrate her point, Abu-Lughod gives the example of young Bedouin women who wear sexy lingerie to challenge parental authority and dominant social mores. She suggests that instead of simply reading such acts as moments of opposition to, and escape from, dominant relations of power, they should also be understood as reinscribing alternative forms of power that are rooted in practices of capitalist consumerism and urban bourgeois values and aesthetics (1990b, 50).

Abu-Lughod concludes her provocative essay with the following observation:

> My argument . . . has been that we should learn to read in various local and everyday resistances the existence of a range of specific strategies and structures of power. Attention to *the forms of resistance in particular societies* can help us become critical of partial or reductionist theories of power. The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmations of the failure—or partial failure—of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that *we respect everyday resistance* not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power. (1990b, 53; emphasis added)

While Abu-Lughod's attention to understanding resistance as a diagnostic of differential forms of power marks an important analytical step that allows us to move beyond the simple binary of resistance/subordination, she nevertheless implies that the task of identifying an act as one of "resistance" is a fairly unproblematic enterprise. She revises her earlier analysis by suggesting that in order to describe the specific forms that acts of resistance take, they need to be located within fields of power rather than outside of them. Thus, even though Abu-Lughod starts her essay by questioning the ascription of a "feminist consciousness" to those for whom this is not a meaningful category (1990b, 47), this does not lead her to challenge the use of the term "resistance" to describe a whole range of human actions, including those which may be socially, ethically, or politically indifferent to the goal of opposing hegemonic norms. I believe it is critical that we ask whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning. Equally important is the question that follows: does the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power—a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms?

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What perceptive studies such as these by Boddy and Abu-Lughod fail to problematize is the universality of the desire—central for liberal and progressive thought, and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes—to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination. This positing of women's agency as consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination, and the concomitant naturalization of freedom as a social ideal, are not simply analytical oversights on the part of feminist authors. Rather, I would argue that their assumptions reflect a deeper tension within feminism attributable to its dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project.[13] Despite the many strands and differences within feminism, what accords the feminist tradition an analytical and political coherence is the premise that where society is structured to serve male interests, the result will be either neglect, or direct suppression, of women's concerns.[14] Feminism, therefore, offers both a *diagnosis* of women's status across cultures and a *prescription* for changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginalized, subordinated, or oppressed (see Strathern 1988, 26–28). Thus the articulation of conditions of relative freedom that enable women both to formulate and to enact self-determined goals and interests remains the object of feminist politics and theorizing. Freedom is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism, and critical scrutiny is applied to those who want to limit women's freedom rather than those who want to extend it.[15]

feminism and freedom

In order to explore in greater depth the notion of freedom that informs feminist scholarship, I find it useful to think about a key distinction that liberal theorists often make between negative and positive freedom (Berlin 1969; Green 1986; Simhony 1993; Taylor 1985c). Negative freedom refers to the

[13] As a number of feminist scholars have noted, these two dimensions of the feminist project often stand in a productive tension against each other. See W. Brown 2001; Butler 1999; Mohanty 1991; Rosaldo 1983; Strathern 1987, 1988.

[14] Despite the differences within feminism, this is a premise that is shared across various feminist political positions—including radical, socialist, liberal, and psychoanalytic—and that marks the domain of feminist discourse. Even in the case of Marxist and socialist feminists who argue that women's subordination is determined by social relations of economic production, there is at least an acknowledgment of the inherent tension between women's interests and those of the larger society dominated and shaped by men (see Hartsock 1983; MacKinnon 1989). For an anthropological argument about the universal character of gender inequality, see Collier and Yanagisako 1989.

[15] John Stuart Mill, a figure central to liberal and feminist thought, argues: "the burden of proof is supposed to be with those who are against liberty; who contend for any restriction or prohibition. . . . The *a priori* presumption is in favour of freedom. . . ." (Mill 1991, 472).

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absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals.[16] Positive freedom, on the other hand, is understood as the capacity to realize an autonomous will, one generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of "universal reason" or "self-interest," and hence unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition. In short, positive freedom may be best described as the capacity for self-mastery and self-government, and negative freedom as the absence of restraints of various kinds on one's ability to act as one wants. It is important to note that the idea of self-realization itself is not an invention of the liberal tradition but has existed historically in a variety of forms, such as the Platonic notion of self-mastery over one's passions, or the more religious notion of realizing oneself through self-transformation, present in Buddhism and a variety of mystical traditions, including Islam and Christianity. Liberalism's unique contribution is to link the notion of self-realization with individual autonomy, wherein the process of realizing oneself is equated with the ability to realize the desires of one's "true will" (Gray 1991).[17]

Although there continues to be considerable debate about these entwined notions of negative and positive freedom,[18] I want to emphasize the concept of individual autonomy that is central to both, and the concomitant elements of coercion and consent that are critical to this topography of freedom. In order for an individual to be free, her actions *must* be the consequence of her "own will" rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion. To the degree that autonomy in this tradition of liberal political theory is a *procedural* principle, and not an ontological or substantive feature of the subject, it delimits the necessary condition for the enactment of the ethics of freedom. Thus, even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated if it is determined that they are undertaken by a freely consenting individual who is acting of her own accord. Political theorist John Christman, for example, considers the interesting situation wherein a slave *chooses* to continue being a slave even when external obstacles and constraints are removed (Christman 1991). In order for such a

[16] Within classical political philosophy, this notion (identified with the thought of Bentham and Hobbes) finds its most common application in debates about the proper role of state intervention within the private lives of individuals. This is also the ground on which feminists have debated proposals for antipornographic legislation (see, for example, Bartky 1990; MacKinnon 1993; Rubin 1984; Samois Collective 1987).

[17] The slippery character of the human will formed in accord with reason and self-interest is itself a point of much discussion among a range of liberal thinkers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, Hegel, and Rousseau (Heller, Sosna, and Wellberry 1986; Taylor 1989). In late-liberal Western societies, the disciplines of psychoanalysis and psychology have played a crucial role in determining what the "true inner self" really is, and what its concomitant needs and desires should be (see, for example, Hacking 1995; Rose 1998).

[18] See Hunt 1991; MacCallum 1967; Simhony 1993; West 1993.

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person to be considered free, Christman argues, an account is required of the process by which the person acquired her desire for slavery. Christman asserts that as long as these desires and values are "generated in accordance with the *procedural* conditions of autonomous preference formation that are constitutive of freedom, then no matter what the 'content' of those desires, the actions which they stimulate will be (positively) free" (1991, 359).[19] In other words, it is not the substance of a desire but its "origin that matters in judgments about autonomy" (Christman 1991, 359). Freedom, in this formulation, consists in the ability to autonomously "choose" one's desires no matter how illiberal they may be.[20]

The concepts of positive and negative freedom, with the attendant requirement of procedural autonomy, provide the ground on which much of the feminist debate unfolds. For example, the positive conception of freedom seems to predominate in projects of feminist historiography (sometimes referred to as "her-story") that seek to capture historically and culturally specific instances of women's self-directed action, unencumbered by patriarchal norms or the will of others.[21] The negative conception of freedom seems to prevail in studies of gender that explore those spaces in women's lives that are independent of men's influence, and possibly coercive presence, treating such spaces as pregnant with possibilities for women's fulfillment or self-realization. Many feminist historians and anthropologists of the Arab Muslim world have thus sought to delimit those conditions and situations in which women seem to autonomously articulate "their own" discourse (such as that of poetry, weaving, cult possession, and the like), at times conferring a potentially liberatory meaning to practices of sex segregation that had traditionally been under-

[19] This "procedural" or "content-neutral" account of autonomy is most influentially advocated by contemporary theorists like Rawls, Habermas, and Dworkin (their differences notwithstanding). It contrasts with a "substantive" account of autonomy in which a person's actions are not only required to be the result of her own choice, but also must, in their *content*, abide by predetermined standards and values that define the ideal of autonomy. In the latter version, a person who willingly chooses to become a slave would not be considered free. It should be noted, however, that the substantive account is only a more robust and stronger version of the procedural account of autonomy. On this and related issues, see Friedman 2003, especially pages 19–29.

[20] This long-standing liberal principle has generated a number of paradoxes in history. For example, the British tolerated acts of *sati* (widow burning) in colonial India, despite their official opposition to the practice, in those cases where the officials could determine that the widow was not coerced but went "willingly to the pyre" (for an excellent discussion of this debate, see Mani 1998). Similarly, some critics of sadomasochism in the United States argue that the practice may be tolerated on the condition that it is undertaken by consenting adults who have a "choice" in the matter, and is not the result of "coercion."

[21] For an illuminating discussion of the historiographical project of "her-story," see Joan Scott 1988, 15–27.

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stood as making women marginal to the public arena of conventional politics (Ahmed 1982; Boddy 1989; Wikan 1991).

My intention here is not to question the profound transformation that the liberal discourse of freedom and individual autonomy has enabled in women's lives around the world, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which these liberal presuppositions have become naturalized in the scholarship on gender. It is quite clear that both positive and negative notions of freedom have been used productively to expand the horizon of what constitutes the domain of legitimate feminist practice and debate. For example, in the 1970s, in response to the call by white middle-class feminists to dismantle the institution of the nuclear family, which they believed to be a key source of women's oppression, Native- and African American feminists argued that freedom, for them, consisted in being able to form families, since the long history of slavery, genocide, and racism had operated precisely by breaking up their communities and social networks (see, for example, Brant 1984; Collins 1991; A. Davis 1983; Lorde 1984).[22] Such arguments successfully expanded feminist understandings of "self-realization/self-fulfillment" by making considerations of class, race, and ethnicity central, thereby forcing feminists to rethink the concept of individual autonomy in light of other issues.

Since then a number of feminist theorists have launched trenchant critiques of the liberal notion of autonomy from a variety of perspectives.[23] While earlier critics had drawn attention to the masculinist assumptions underpinning the ideal of autonomy (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982), later scholars faulted this ideal for its emphasis on the atomistic, individualized, and bounded characteristics of the self at the expense of its relational qualities formed through social interactions within forms of human community (Benhabib 1992; Young 1990). Consequently, there have been various attempts to redefine autonomy so as to capture the emotional, embodied, and socially embedded character of people, particularly of women (Friedman 1997, 2003; Joseph 1999; Nedelsky 1989). A more radical strain of poststructuralist theory has situated its critique of autonomy within a larger challenge posed to the *illusory* character of the rationalist, self-authorizing, transcendental subject presupposed by Enlightenment thought in general, and the liberal tradition in particular. Rational thought, these critics argue, secures its universal scope and authority by performing a necessary exclusion of all that is bodily, femi-

[22] Similarly "A Black Feminist Statement" by the Combahee River Collective rejected the appeal for lesbian separatism made by white feminists on the grounds that the history of racial oppression required black women to make alliances with male members of their communities in order to continue fighting against institutionalized racism (Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1982).

[23] For an interesting discussion of the contradictions generated by the privileged position accorded to the concept of autonomy in feminist theory, see Adams and Minson 1978.

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nine, emotional, nonrational, and intersubjective (Butler 1999; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994). This exclusion cannot be substantively or conceptually recuperated, however, through recourse to an unproblematic feminine experience, body, or imaginary (*pace* Beauvoir and Irigaray), but must be thought through the very terms of the discourse of metaphysical transcendence that enacts these exclusions.[24]

In what follows, I would like to push further in the direction opened by these poststructuralist debates. In particular, my argument for uncoupling the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will is indebted to poststructuralist critiques of the transcendental subject, voluntarism, and repressive models of power. Yet, as will become clear, my analysis also departs from these frameworks insomuch as I question the overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms, to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power. In other words, I will argue that the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion. In doing so, this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance. In order to grasp these modes of action indebted to other reasons and histories, I will suggest that it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.

It is quite clear that the idea of freedom and liberty as *the* political ideal is relatively new in modern history. Many societies, including Western ones, have flourished with aspirations other than this. Nor, for that matter, does the narrative of individual and collective liberty exhaust the desires with which people live in liberal societies. If we recognize that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions, then the question arises: how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?

Put simply, my point is this: if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, respon-

[24] For an excellent discussion of this point in the scholarship on feminist ethics, see Colebrook 1997.

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sibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms.

It may be argued in response that this kind of challenge to the natural status accorded to the desire for freedom in analyses of gender runs the risk of Orientalizing Arab and Muslim women all over again—repeating the errors of pre-1970s Orientalist scholarship that defined Middle Eastern women as passive submissive Others, bereft of the enlightened consciousness of their "Western sisters," and hence doomed to lives of servile submission to men. I would contend, however, that to examine the discursive and practical conditions within which women come to cultivate various forms of desire and capacities of ethical action is a radically different project than an Orientalizing one that locates the desire for submission in an innate ahistorical cultural essence. Indeed, if we accept the notion that all forms of desire are discursively organized (as much of recent feminist scholarship has argued), then it is important to interrogate the practical and conceptual conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including desire for submission to recognized authority. We cannot treat as natural and imitable only those desires that ensure the emergence of feminist politics.

Consider, for example, the women from the mosque movement with whom I worked. The task of realizing piety placed these women in conflict with several structures of authority. Some of these structures were grounded in instituted standards of Islamic orthodoxy, and others in norms of liberal discourse; some were grounded in the authority of parents and male kin, and others in state institutions. Yet the *rationale* behind these conflicts was not predicated upon, and therefore cannot be understood only by reference to, arguments for gender equality or resistance to male authority. Nor can these women's practices be read as a reinscription of traditional roles, since the women's mosque movement has significantly reconfigured the gendered practice of Islamic pedagogy and the social institution of mosques (see chapters 3 and 5). One could, of course, argue in response that, the intent of these women notwithstanding, the actual effects of their practices may be analyzed in terms of their role in reinforcing or undermining structures of male domination. While conceding that such an analysis is feasible and has been useful at times, I would nevertheless argue that it remains encumbered by the binary terms of resistance and subordination, and ignores projects, discourses, and desires that are not captured by these terms (such as those pursued by the women I worked with).

Studies on the resurgent popularity of the veil in urban Egypt since the

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1970s provide excellent examples of these issues. The proliferation of such studies (El Guindi 1981; Hoffman-Ladd 1987; MacLeod 1991; Radwan 1982; Zuhur 1992) reflects scholars' surprise that, contrary to their expectations, so many "modern Egyptian women" have returned to wearing the veil. Some of these studies offer functionalist explanations, citing a variety of reasons why women take on the veil voluntarily (for example, the veil makes it easy for women to avoid sexual harassment on public transportation, lowers the cost of attire for working women, and so on). Other studies identify the veil as a symbol of resistance to the commodification of women's bodies in the media, and more generally to the hegemony of Western values. While these studies have made important contributions, it is surprising that their authors have paid so little attention to Islamic virtues of female modesty or piety, especially given that many of the women who have taken up the veil frame their decision precisely in these terms.[25] Instead, analysts often explain the motivations of veiled women in terms of standard models of sociological causality (such as social protest, economic necessity, anomie, or utilitarian strategy), while terms like morality, divinity, and virtue are accorded the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized.[26] I do not, of course, mean to suggest that we should restrict our analyses to folk categories. Rather, I want to argue for a critical vigilance against the elisions any process of translation entails, especially when the language of social science claims for itself a transparent universalism while portraying the language used by "ordinary people" as a poor approximation of their reality.[27]

My argument should be familiar to anthropologists who have long acknowledged that the terms people use to organize their lives are not simply a gloss for universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience.[28] For this reason I have found it necessary, in the chapters that follow, to

[25] See, in contrast, Lila Abu-Lughod's interesting discussion of the veil as a critical aspect of the concept of modesty (*ḥasham*) among Egyptian Bedouins (1986, 159–67).

[26] For example, in a survey conducted among veiled university students in Cairo, a majority of the interviewees cited piety as their primary motivation for taking up the veil. In commenting on the results of this survey, the sociologist Sherifa Zuhur argues that "rather than the newfound piety" her informants claimed, the real motivations for veiling inhered in the socioeconomic incentives and benefits that accrue to veiled women in Egyptian society (Zuhur 1992, 83).

[27] For a thoughtful discussion of the problems entailed in the translation of supernatural and metaphysical concepts into the language of secular time and history, see Chakrabarty 2000; Rancière 1994.

[28] For an excellent exploration of the use of language in the cultural construction of personhood, see Caton 1990; Keane 1997; Rosaldo 1982. Also see Marilyn Strathern's critique of Western conceptions of "society and culture" that feminist deconstructivist approaches assume in analyzing gender relations in non-Western societies (1992b).

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attend carefully to the specific logic of the discourse of piety: a logic that inheres not in the intentionality of the actors, but in the relationships that are articulated between words, concepts, and practices that constitute a particular discursive tradition.[29] I would insist, however, that an appeal to understanding the coherence of a discursive tradition is neither to justify that tradition, nor to argue for some irreducible essentialism or cultural relativism. It is, instead, to take a necessary step toward explaining the force that a discourse commands.

POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINIST THEORY AND AGENCY

In order to elaborate my theoretical approach, let me begin by examining the arguments of Judith Butler, who remains, for many, the preeminent theorist of poststructuralist feminist thought, and whose arguments have been central to my own work. Central to Butler's analysis are two insights drawn from Michel Foucault, both quite well known by now. Power, according to Foucault, cannot be understood solely on the model of domination as something possessed and deployed by individuals or sovereign agents over others, with a singular intentionality, structure, or location that presides over its rationality and execution. Rather, power is to be understood as a strategic relation of force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses (Foucault 1978, 1980). Secondly, the subject, argues Foucault, does not precede power relations, in the form of an individuated consciousness, but is produced through these relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility. Central to his formulation is what Foucault calls the paradox of *subjectivation*: the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent (Butler 1993, 1997c; Foucault 1980, 1983). Stated otherwise, one may argue that the set of capacities inhering in a subject—that is, the abilities that define her modes of agency—are not the residue of an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power but are themselves the products of those operations.[30] Such an understanding of power and subject formation

[29] The concept "discursive tradition" is from T. Asad 1986. See my discussion of the relevance of this concept to my overall argument in chapter 3.

[30] An important aspect of Foucault's analytics of power is his focus on what he called its "techniques," the various mechanisms and strategies through which power comes to be exercised at its point of application on subjects and objects. Butler differs from Foucault in this respect in that her work is not so much an exploration of techniques of power as of issues of performativity, interpellation, and psychic organization of power. Over time, Butler has articulated her differences with Foucault in various places; see, for example, Butler 1993, 248 n. 19; 1997c, 83–105; 1999, 119–41; and Butler and Connolly 2000.

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encourages us to conceptualize agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable.

Drawing on Foucault's insights, Butler asks a key question: "[I]f power works not merely to dominate or oppress existing subjects, but also forms subjects, what is this formation?" (Butler 1997c, 18). By questioning the prediscursive status of the concept of subject, and inquiring instead into the relations of power that produce it, Butler breaks with those feminist analysts who have formulated the issue of personhood in terms of the relative autonomy of the individual from the social. Thus the issue for Butler is not how the social enacts the individual (as it was for generations of feminists), but what are the discursive conditions that sustain the entire metaphysical edifice of contemporary individuality.

Butler's signal contribution to feminist theory lies in her challenge to the sex/gender dichotomy that has served as the ground on which much of feminist debate, at least since the 1940s, has proceeded. For Butler, the problem with the sex/gender distinction lies in the assumption that there is a prerepresentational matter or sexed body that grounds the cultural inscription of gender. Butler argues not only that there is no prerepresentational sex (or material body) that is not already constituted by the system of gender representation, but also that gender discourse is *itself* constitutive of materialities it refers to (and is in this sense not purely representational).[31] Butler says, "To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. In this sense, the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of 'referentiality' is altered. In philosophical terms, the constative claim is always to some degree performative" (Butler 1993, 10–11).

What, then, is the process through which the materiality of the sexed and gendered subject is enacted? To answer this, Butler turns not so much to the analysis of institutions and technologies of subject formation, as Foucault did, but to the analysis of language as a system of signification through which sub-

[31] Feminist philosophers Elizabeth Grosz and Moira Gatens, influenced by the work of Gilles Deleuze, make a similar critique of the problematic distinction between materiality and representation underpinning the sex/gender dichotomy (Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994). While they are similar to Butler in their rejection of any simple appeal to a prerepresentational body, or a feminine ontology, as the foundation for articulating feminist politics, they differ from Butler in that they accord the body a force that can affect systems of representation on terms that are other than those of the system itself. For an interesting discussion of the differences between these theorists, see Colebrook 2000a.

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jects are produced and interpolated. In particular, Butler builds upon Derrida's reinterpretation of J. L. Austin's notion of the performative as "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (Butler 1993, 2).[32] For Butler, the subject in her sexed and gendered materiality is constituted performatively through a reiterated enactment of heterosexual norms, which retroactively produce, on the one hand, "the appearance of gender as an abiding interior depth" (1997b, 14), and on the other hand, the putative facticity of sexual difference which serves to further consolidate the heterosexual imperative. In contrast to a long tradition of feminist scholarship that treated norms as an external social imposition that constrain the individual, Butler forces us to rethink this external-internal opposition by arguing that social norms are the necessary ground through which the subject is realized and comes to enact her agency.

Butler combines the Foucauldian analysis of the subject with psychoanalytic theory, in particular adopting Lacanian notions of "foreclosure" and "abjection" to emphasize certain exclusionary operations that she thinks are necessary to subject formation. She argues that the subject is produced simultaneously through a necessary repudiation of identities, forms of subjectivities, and discursive logics, what she calls "a constitutive outside to the subject" (Butler 1993, 3), which marks the realm of all that is unspeakable, unsignifiable, and unintelligible from the purview of the subject, but remains, nonetheless, necessary to the subject's self-understanding and formulation.[33] This foreclosure is performatively and reiteratively enacted, in the sense that "the subject who speaks within the sphere of the speakable implicitly reinvokes the foreclosure on which it depends and, thus, depends on it again" (1997a, 139–40).

Given Butler's theory of the subject, it is not surprising that her analysis of performativity also informs her conceptualization of agency; indeed, as she says, "the iterability of performativity *is* a theory of agency" (1999, xxiv; emphasis added). To the degree that the stability of social norms is a function of their repeated enactment, agency for Butler is grounded in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be reappropriated or resignified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms. Since all social formations are reproduced through a reenactment of norms, this makes these formations vulnerable because each restatement/reenactment can fail. Thus the condition of possibility of each social formation is also "the possibil-

[32] Whereas for Austin the performative derives its force from the conventions that govern a speech act, for Derrida this force must be understood in terms of the iterable character of all signs (see Derrida 1988). For an interesting critique of Derrida's reading of Austin, see Cavell 1995.

[33] For Butler's discussion of how Foucauldian conceptions of power and the subject may be productively combined with the work of Freud and Lacan, see 1997c, 83–105.

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ity of its undoing" (Butler 1997b, 14). She explains this point succinctly in regard to sex/gender:

> As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm. . . . This instability is the *de*constituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which "sex" is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of "sex" into a potentially productive crisis. (1993, 10)[34]

It is important to note that there are several points on which Butler departs from the notions of agency and resistance that I criticized earlier. To begin with, Butler questions what she calls an "emancipatory model of agency," one that presumes that all humans qua humans are "endowed with a will, a freedom, and an intentionality" whose workings are "thwarted by relations of power that are considered external to the subject" (Benhabib et al. 1995, 136). In its place, Butler locates the possibility of agency within structures of power (rather than outside of it) and, more importantly, suggests that the reiterative structure of norms serves not only to *consolidate* a particular regime of discourse/power but also provides the means for its *destabilization*.[35] In other words, there is no possibility of "undoing" social norms that is independent of the "doing" of norms; agency resides, therefore, within this productive reiterability. Butler also resists the impetus to tether the meaning of agency to a predefined teleology of emancipatory politics. As a result, the logic of subversion and resignification cannot be predetermined in Butler's framework because acts of resignification/subversion are, she argues, contingent and fragile, appearing in unpredictable places and behaving in ways that confound our expectations.[36]

I find Butler's critique of humanist conceptions of agency and subject very compelling, and, indeed, my arguments in this book are manifestly informed by it. I have, however, found it productive to argue with certain tensions that

[34] Butler's analysis of the production of sexed/gendered subjects is built upon a general theory of subject formation, one she makes more explicit in her later writings. See Butler 1997a, 1997c, and Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000.

[35] Echoing Foucault, Butler argues, "The paradox of subjectivation (*assujetissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (1993, 15).

[36] See Butler's treatment of this topic in "Gender Is Burning" in Butler 1993, and in Butler 2001.

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characterize Butler's work in order to expand her analytics to a somewhat different, if related, set of problematics. One key tension in Bulter's work owes to the fact that while she emphasizes the ineluctable relationship between the consolidation and destabilization of norms, her discussion of agency tends to focus on those operations of power that resignify and subvert norms. Thus even though Butler insists time and again that all acts of subversion are a product of the terms of violence that they seek to oppose, her analysis of agency often privileges those moments that "open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims" (1993, 122), or that provide an occasion "for a radical rearticulation" of the dominant symbolic horizon (1993, 23).[37] In other words, the concept of agency in Butler's work is developed primarily in contexts where norms are thrown into question or are subject to resignification.[38]

Clearly Butler's elaboration of the notion of agency should be understood in the specific context of the political interventions in which her work is inserted. The theoretical practice Butler has developed over the last fifteen years is deeply informed by a concern for the violence that heterosexual normativity enacts and the way in which it delimits the possibilities of livable human existence. Her theorization of agency therefore must be understood in its performative dimension: as a political praxis aimed at unsettling dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. As a textual practice situated within the space of the academy, the context of Butler's intervention is not limited to the legal, philosophical, or popular discourses she analyzes but is also constituted by the reception her work has garnered within feminist scholarship. Butler has had to defend herself against the charge, leveled against her by a range of feminists, that her work has the effect of undermining any agenda of progressive political and social reform by deconstructing the very conceptions of subject and power that enable it (see, for example, Bordo 1993, and the exchange in Benhabib et al. 1995). To counter these claims, Butler has continually positioned her work in relation to the project of articulating a radical democratic

[37] For example, in discussing the question of agency, Butler writes, "an account of iterability of the subject . . . shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned" (Butler 1997c, 29). Note the equivalence drawn here between agency and the ability of performatives to oppose normative structures. Such oft-repeated statements stand in tension with her own cautionary phrases, in this case within the same text, when she admonishes the reader that agency should not be conceptualized as "always and only opposed to power" (Butler 1997c, 17).

[38] Amy Hollywood, in her reading of Butler, suggests that Butler inherits her valorization of resignification—the propensity of utterances and speech acts to break from their prior significations—from Derrida. But whereas Derrida, Hollywood argues, remains ethically and politically neutral toward this characteristic of language and signs, Butler often reads resignification as politically positive (Hollywood 2002, 107 n. 57).

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politics,[39] and in doing so has emphasized counter-hegemonic modalities of agency.[40] An important consequence of these aspects of Butler's work (and its reception) is that her analysis of the power of norms remains grounded in an agonistic framework, one in which norms suppress and/or are subverted, are reiterated and/or resignified—so that one gets little sense of the work norms perform beyond this register of suppression and subversion within the constitution of the subject.

Norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, I would suggest, but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways. This is a point on which I think Butler would not disagree; indeed, in her writings she often reverts to the trope of the "psyche" and the language of psychoanalysis to capture the density of ties through which the individual is attached to the subjectivating power of norms (see, for example, Butler 1997c). Butler's exploration of this density often remains, however, subservient on the one hand to her overall interest in tracking the possibilities of resistance to the regulating power of normativity,[41] and on the other hand to her model of performativity, which is primarily conceptualized in terms of a dualistic structure of consolidation/resignification, doing/undoing, of norms.

the subject of norms

I would like to push the question of norms further in a direction that I think allows us to deepen the analysis of subject formation and also address the

[39] For Butler's most recent engagement with this project, see Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000. It is clear from this text that while Butler is uncomfortable, more so than her interlocutors, with a universalist theory of radical change, she remains interested in theorizing about conditions conducive to creating the possibility of radical democratic politics.

[40] Consider, for example, the following statement by Butler in which she immediately qualifies her objection to a subject-centered theory of agency with the reassurance that her objections do not foreclose the possibility of resistance to subjection: "If . . . subjectivation is bound up with subjection . . . then it will not do to invoke a notion of the subject as the ground of agency, since the subject is itself produced through operations of power that delimit in advance what the aims and expanse of agency will be. It does not follow from this insight, however, that we are all always already trapped, and that there is no point of resistance to regulation or to the form of subjection that regulation takes" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000, 151).

[41] Butler argues, for example, that Foucault's notion of subjectivation can be productively supplemented with certain reformulations of psychoanalytic theory. For Butler, the force of this supplementation seems to reside, notably, in its ability to address the "problem of locating or accounting for resistance: Where does resistance to or in disciplinary subject formation take place? Does [Foucault's] reduction of the psychoanalytically rich notion of the psyche to that of the imprisoning soul [in *Discipline and Punish*] eliminate the possibility of resistance to normalization and to subject formation, a resistance that emerges precisely from the incommensurability between psyche and subject?" (Butler 1997c, 87).

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problem of reading agency primarily in terms of resistance to the regularizing impetus of structures of normativity. In particular, I would like to expand Butler's insight that norms are not simply a social imposition on the subject but constitute the very substance of her intimate, valorized interiority. But in doing so, I want to move away from an agonistic and dualistic framework—one in which norms are conceptualized on the model of doing and undoing, consolidation and subversion—and instead think about the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated. As I will argue below, this in turn requires that we explore the relationship between the immanent form a normative act takes, the model of subjectivity it presupposes (specific articulations of volition, emotion, reason, and bodily expression), and the kinds of authority upon which such an act relies. Let me elaborate by discussing the problems a dualistic conception of norms poses when analyzing the practices of the mosque movement.

Consider, for example, the Islamic virtue of female modesty (*al-iḥtishām*, *al-ḥayā'*) that many Egyptian Muslims uphold and value (discussed in chapter 5). Despite a consensus about its importance, there is considerable debate about how this virtue should be lived, and particularly about whether its realization requires the donning of the veil. A majority of the participants in the mosque movement (and the larger piety movement of which the mosque movement is an integral part) argue that the veil is a necessary component of the virtue of modesty because the veil both expresses "true modesty" and is the means through which modesty is acquired. They draw, therefore, an ineluctable relationship between the norm (modesty) and the bodily form it takes (the veil) such that the veiled body becomes the necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created *and* expressed. In contrast to this understanding is a position (associated with prominent secularist writers) that argues that the virtue of modesty is no different than any other human attribute—such as moderation or humility: it is a facet of character but does not commit one to any particular expressive repertoire such as donning the veil. Notably, these authors oppose the veil but not the virtue of modesty, which they continue to regard as appropriate to feminine conduct. The veil, in their view, has been invested with an importance that is unwarranted when it comes to judgments about female modesty (see chapter 5).

The debate about the veil is only one part of a much larger discussion in Egyptian society wherein political differences between Islamists and secularists, and even among Islamists of various persuasions, are expressed through arguments about ritual performative behavior. While I will return to this discussion in chapter 4, what I want to point out here is that the most interesting features of this debate lie not so much in whether the norm of modesty is subverted or enacted, but in the radically different ways in which the norm is sup-

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posed to be lived and inhabited. Notably, each view posits a very different conceptualization of the relationship between embodied behavior and the virtue or norm of modesty: for the pietists, bodily behavior is at the core of the proper realization of the norm, and for their opponents, it is a contingent and unnecessary element in modesty's enactment.

Some of the questions that follow from this observation are: How do we analyze the work that the body performs in these different conceptualizations of the norm? Is performative behavior differently understood in each of these views and, if so, how? How is the self differently tied to the authority the norm commands in these two imaginaries? Furthermore, what sorts of ethical and political subjects are presupposed by these two imaginaries, and what forms of ethico-political life do they enable or foreclose? These questions cannot be answered as long as we remain within the binary logic of the doing and undoing of norms. They require, instead, that we explode the category of norms into its constituent elements—to examine the immanent form that norms take, and to inquire into the attachments their particular morphology generates within the topography of the self. My reason for urging this move has to do with my interest in understanding how different modalities of moral-ethical action contribute to the construction of particular kinds of subjects, subjects whose political anatomy cannot be grasped without applying critical scrutiny to the precise form their embodied actions take.

This manner of analyzing contemporary debates about Islamic virtues or norms also has consequences for how we might understand the political effects that the piety movement has generated within Egyptian society. Scholars of Islamist movements have often argued that the resurgence of Islamic forms of sociability (such as veiling, increased interest in the correct performance of Islamic rituals, and the proliferation of Islamic charities) within a range of Muslim societies is best understood as an expression of *resistance* against Western politico-cultural domination as well as a form of social protest against the failed modernizing project of postcolonial Muslim regimes (Burgat and Dowell 1997; Esposito 1992; Göle 1996; Roy 1994). In this view, the project of restoring orthodox Islamic virtues crucially depends upon an oppositional stance toward what may be loosely defined as a modernist secular-liberal ethos—an ethos whose agents are often understood to be postcolonial Muslim regimes in cahoots with dominant Western powers.

While this interpretation is not entirely wrong and captures an important aspect of Islamist movements, it nonetheless reduces their complexity to the trope of *resistance* without adequate regard for key questions such as: What specifically do the Islamist movements oppose about Western hegemony, postcoloniality, or a secular-liberal ethos? Toward what end? And, more importantly, what forms of life do these movements enable that are not so easily

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captured in terms of a relationship of negation to the existing hegemonic order? Furthermore, as I will show in chapter 2, the relationship between Islamism and liberal secularity is one of proximity and coimbrication rather than of simple opposition or, for that matter, accommodation; it therefore needs to be analyzed in terms of the historically shifting, ambiguous, and unpredictable encounters that this proximity has generated. This relationship is best tracked, I want to suggest further, through attention to the specificity of terms that have attended debates about Islamic virtues (or orthodox Islamic norms) in modern history. As I hope to show in the chapters that follow, these debates are ineluctably tied to emergent forms of subjectivity that secular processes have contingently provoked in their wake. In order to set the stage for such an exploration, let me first spell out what I mean when I insist that we attend to the immanent forms Islamic virtues take within contemporary debates about Islamization and what are the analytical stakes in pursuing such an approach.

MANIFEST NORMS AND ETHICAL FORMATION

Cultural critic Jeffery Minson has argued persuasively that one way in which the legacy of humanist ethics, particularly in its Kantian formulation, has continued to be important to post-Enlightenment thought is in the relative lack of attention given to the morphology of moral actions, that is, to their precise shape and form (Minson 1993). Minson argues that this legacy is traceable at least as far back as Kant, for whom morality proper was primarily a rational matter that entailed the exercise of the faculty of reason, shorn of the specific context (of social virtues, habit, character formation, and so on) in which the act unfolded. The Kantian legacy, I would add, becomes particularly important in light of the tradition of Aristotelian ethics it displaces—a tradition in which morality was both realized through, and manifest in, outward behavioral forms.[42] Against this tradition, Kant argued that a moral act could be moral only to the extent that it was not a result of habituated virtue but a product of the critical faculty of reason. The latter requires that one act morally *in spite of* one's inclinations, habits, and disposition.[43] Kant's telescop-

[42] The relative decline of the importance accorded to religious rituals in post-Reformation Christianity constitutes another trajectory of this same development. See T. Asad 1993.

[43] Kant is explicit in his objection to morality that is a result of habituated virtues, acquired through the long process of character formation: "When the firm resolve to comply with one's duty has become a habit, it is called *virtue* also in a legal sense, in its *empirical character* (*virtus phaenomenon*). Virtue here has the abiding maxim of *lawful* actions. . . . Virtue, in this sense, is accordingly acquired *little by little*, and to some it means a long habituation (in the observance of the

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ing of moral action down to the movements of the will stands in contrast to the value ascribed to the particular form a moral act took in the Aristotelian worldview.[44] The question of motivation, deliberation, and choice in the Aristotelian tradition was important too, of course, but only from the standpoint of actual practices.

One consequence of this Kantian conception of ethics is the relative lack of attention paid to the manifest form ethical practices take, and a general demotion of conduct, social demeanor, and etiquettes in our analyses of moral systems. As Minson points out, even scholars like Bourdieu, whose work focuses on practices of dress, physical bearing, and styles of comportment—things that Bourdieu calls "the practical mnemonics" of a culture—consider these practices interesting only insofar as a rational evaluation reveals them to be the signs and symbols of a much deeper and more fundamental reality of social structures and cultural logics (Minson 1993, 31). I agree with Minson: when Bourdieu considers the variety of practices that characterize a particular social group (such as their styles of eating, socializing, and entertainment), he is primarily concerned with how these practices embody and symbolize the *doxa* and ethos of the group such that the ideologies the members inhabit come to be congealed in their social or class *habitus* (see, for example, Bourdieu 1977, 1990). One may argue, however, that the significance of an embodied practice is not exhausted by its ability to function as an index of social and class status or a group's ideological habitus.[45] The specificity of a bodily

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law), in virtue of which a human being, through gradual reformation of conduct and consolidation of his maxims, passes from a propensity to vice to its opposite. But not the slightest *change of heart* is necessary for this; only a change of mores. . . . However, that a human being should become not merely *legally* good, but *morally* good (pleasing to God) i.e. virtuous according to the intelligible character [of virtue] (*virtus noumenon*) and thus in need of no other incentive to recognize a duty except the representation of duty itself—that, so long as the foundation of the maxims of the human being remains impure, cannot be effected through gradual *reform* but must rather be effected through a *revolution* in the disposition of the human being. . . . And so a 'new man' can come about only through a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation . . . and a change of heart" (Kant 1998, 67–68).

[44] This does not mean that for Kant morality was purely an individual matter, guided by personal preference; rather, an act was moral only insofar as it was made in accord with a universally valid form of rationality. As Charles Taylor points out, Kant's moral law combines two features: everyone is obligated to act in accord with reason, and "it is an essential feature of reason that it be valid for everyone, for all rational creatures alike. That is the basis of the first form of Kant's categorical imperative: that I should act only according to a maxim which I could at the same time will as a universal law. For if I am right to will something, then everyone is right to will it, and it must thus be something that could be willed for everybody" (Taylor 1985b, 323).

[45] In *Excitable Speech* (1997a), Butler praises Bourdieu's work on *habitus* for its sensitivity to how an individual's social and cultural location comes to be embodied in her disposition. She criticizes him, however, for failing to attend to the potential of the body to resist this system of

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practice is also interesting for the kind of relationship it presupposes to the act it constitutes wherein an analysis of the particular form that the body takes might transform our conceptual understanding of the act itself. Furthermore, bodily behavior does not simply stand in a relationship of meaning to self and society, but it also endows the self with certain kinds of capacities that provide the substance from which the world is acted upon.

positive ethics

There is another tradition of ethics, Aristotelian in inspiration, that provides a means of redressing some of the problems discussed above. Michel Foucault's later work draws upon this tradition to formulate what Claire Colebrook aptly calls a "positive conception of ethics" that extends the domain of ethics "beyond notions of norms, justification, legitimation, and meaning to include the consideration of the practices, selves, bodies, and desires that determine (and are codetermined by) ethics" (Colebrook 1998, 50). Foucault's conception of positive ethics is Aristotelian in that it conceives of ethics not as an Idea, or as a set of regulatory norms, but as a set of practical activities that are germane to a certain way of life.[46] Ethics in this conception is embedded in a set of specific practices (what Aristotle called "practices of virtue"). It is only from the standpoint of the dispositions formed through these practices that the Kantian question of moral deliberation can be posed. In this view, you ask not what a particular ethical theory means, but what it does.[47] In contrast to other contemporary writings on "virtue ethics," Foucault's use of Aristotelian ethics is not geared toward asserting its universal validity, or recuperating its various elements for solving contemporary moral problems—such as reclaiming the idea of *telos* or a collective notion of the good life (see, for example, MacIntyre

signification and to pose a challenge to its logic. From the standpoint of my argument here, it is interesting to note that while Butler wants to emphasize how the body becomes a site of resistance to social inscription, and Bourdieu stresses the constraining aspects of embodied social power, both analyze the body through the binary logic of subversion and/or consolidation of social norms. What is elided here are the different modalities through which the body comes to inhabit or live the regulative power of norms, modalities that cannot be captured within the dualistic logic of resistance and constraint.

[46] This should not be taken to mean that Foucault's conception of ethics is anti-Kantian in any simple sense. For an insightful discussion of Kant's influence on Foucault's later work on ethics, in particular the conjoining of ethics and freedom, see the chapter entitled "Self Improvement" in Hacking 2002.

[47] Colebrook argues that Foucault's account of ancient ethics is "a positive ethics in which actions are evaluated according to what they do rather than what they mean, 'each having its specific character or shape'" (1998, 43).

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1984; Taylor 1995).[48] Instead, for Foucault, this tradition allows us to think of ethics as always local and particular, pertaining to a specific set of procedures, techniques, and discourses through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed.[49] In what follows, I will pursue the direction opened up by this approach—not only because I find it analytically rich but also because, as I will explain in chapter 4, aspects of the Aristotelian tradition have been influential in shaping the pietistic practices of Islam.

Foucault distinguished ethical practices from "morals," reserving the latter to refer to sets of norms, rules, values, and injunctions. "Ethics," on the other hand, refers to those practices, techniques, and discourses through which a subject transforms herself in order to achieve a particular state of being, happiness, or truth (Foucault 1990, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988; see also Davidson 1994, Faubion 2001, and Rabinow 1997).[50] For Foucault, ethics is a modality of power that "permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" (Foucault 1997b, 225) in order to transform themselves into the willing subjects of a particular moral discourse. Despite his attention to the individual's effort at constituting herself, the subject of Foucault's analysis is not a voluntaristic, autonomous subject who fashions herself in a protean manner. Rather, the subject is formed within the limits of a historically specific set of formative practices and moral injunctions that are delimited in advance—what Foucault characterizes as "modes of subjectivation." Foucault thus treats subjectivity not as a private space of self-cultivation, but as an effect of a modality of power operationalized through a set of moral codes that summon a subject to constitute herself in accord with its precepts. "Moral subjectivation," in turn, refers to the models available "for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object" (Foucault 1990, 29).

For Foucault, the relationship between moral codes and modes of subjectivation is not overdetermined, however, in the sense that the subject simply complies with moral codes (or resists them). Rather, Foucault's framework as-

[48] The neo-Aristotelian tradition of "virtue ethics" generally argues for the reinstatement of the priority of virtue as the central ethical concept over the concept of "the good" or "the right" in contemporary moral thought. On virtue ethics, see Anscombe 1981; Foot 1978; Lovibond 2002.

[49] For a contrasting reading that combines Foucault's work on ethics with the scholarship on virtue ethics, see Lovibond 2002.

[50] Although Foucault draws a distinction between "code-oriented" and "ethics-oriented" moralities, he does not consider them incommensurable. For example, he argues that Christianity has had both moralities functioning side by side, even if, during different periods, the relative emphasis on each has varied (Foucault 1990, 30).

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sumes that there are many different ways of forming a relationship with a moral code, each of which establishes a particular relationship between capacities of the self (will, reason, desire, action, and so on) and a particular norm. The precise embodied form that obedience to a moral code takes is not a contingent but a *necessary* element of ethical analysis in that it is a means to describing the specific constitution of the ethical subject. In other words, it is only through an analysis of the specific shape and character of ethical practices that one can apprehend the kind of ethical subject that is formed. These practices are technical practices for Foucault and include corporeal and body techniques, spiritual exercises, and ways of conducting oneself—all of which are "positive" in the sense that they are manifest in, and immanent to, everyday life. Notably, the importance of these practices does not reside in the meanings they signify to their practitioners, but in the *work they do* in constituting the individual; similarly, the body is not a medium of signification but the substance and the necessary tool through which the embodied subject is formed.

I find Foucault's analysis of ethical formation particularly helpful for conceptualizing agency beyond the confines of the binary model of enacting and subverting norms. Specifically, he draws our attention to the contribution of external forms to the development of human ethical capacities, to specific modes of human agency. Instead of limiting agency to those acts that disrupt existing power relations, Foucault's work encourages us to think of agency: (a) in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions; and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed. The paradox of subjectivation is central to Foucault's formulation in that the capacity for action is enabled and created by specific relations of subordination. To clarify this paradox, we might consider the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the often painful regime of disciplinary practice, as well as to the hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability—the requisite agency—to play the instrument with mastery. Importantly, her agency is predicated upon her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as "docility." Although we have come to associate docility with the abandonment of agency, the term literally implies the malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge—a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity than one of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement.[51]

[51] One of the meanings listed for docility in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is: "the quality of teachableness, readiness and willingness to receive instruction, aptness to be taught, amenability to training" (OED 1999).

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modes of subjectivation and the mosque movement

The approach I am suggesting can be further elaborated by reference to the four elements Foucault posits as central to the study of ethics. This fourfold scheme, however, cannot be taken as a blueprint for the study of ethics; rather, the utility of Foucault's analytical framework lies in the fact that it raises a series of questions about the relationship between moral codes and ethical conduct, questions that are answerable only through an examination of specific practices through which historically located moral norms are lived. The first component, which Foucault calls the "substance of ethics," refers to those aspects of the self that pertain to the domain of ethical judgment and practice. The substance of ethics in medieval Christianity, for example, was flesh and desire, whereas the part of oneself most subject to analysis and labor in the modern period is feelings (Foucault 1997b, 263). The second aspect of ethics, which Foucault calls the "mode of subjectivation," refers to how people are incited or called upon to recognize their moral obligations—for example, whether through divine law, rational rule, or cosmological order. As Nikolas Rose has pointed out, this aspect of ethics draws our attention to the *kind of authority* through which a subject comes to recognize the truth about herself, and the relationship she establishes between herself and those who are deemed to hold the truth (Rose 1998, 27). The third aspect of ethics pertains to the operations one performs on oneself in order to become an ethical subject—a process analyzed under the label "techniques of the self." Finally, the fourth component of ethics is *telos*: the mode of being one seeks to achieve within a historically specific authoritative model.

Foucault's analysis of ethics is useful for understanding key aspects of the women's mosque movement I worked with, and of the piety movement in general. The practices of these movements presuppose the existence of a divine plan for human life—embodied in the Quran, the exegetical literature, and the moral codes derived therefrom—that each individual is responsible for following. Participants in the mosque movement are summoned to recognize their moral obligations through invocations of divine texts and edificatory literature. This form of morality, however, is not strictly juridical. There are no centralized authorities that enforce the moral code and penalize infractions. Rather, the mosque movement has a strong individualizing impetus that requires each person to adopt a set of ascetic practices for shaping moral conduct.[52] Each individual must interpret the moral codes, in accord with tradi-

[52] Chapter 2 describes the ways in which this individualizing trend has been accelerated in the twentieth century.

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tional guidelines, in order to discover how she, as an individual, may best realize the divine plan for her life.

In comparison with other currents within the Islamic Revival, the mosque movement is unique in the extraordinary degree of pedagogical emphasis it places on outward markers of religiosity—ritual practices, styles of comporting oneself, dress, and so on. The participants in the mosque movement regard these practices as the necessary and ineluctable means for realizing the form of religiosity they are cultivating. For the mosque participants, it is the various movements of the body that comprise the material substance of the ethical domain. There exists an elaborate system of techniques by which the body's actions and capacities can be examined and worked upon, both individually and collectively. The mosque lessons are one important space where training in this kind of ascetic practice is acquired. As I will explore later, women learn to analyze the movements of the body and soul in order to establish coordination between inner states (intentions, movements of desire and thought, etc.) and outer conduct (gestures, actions, speech, etc.). Indeed, this distinction between inner and outer aspects of the self provides a central axis around which the panoply of ascetic practices is organized. As we will see in chapter 4, this principle of coordination has implications for how we might analyze the conceptual relationship the body articulates with the self and with others, and by extension, the self's variable relationships to structures of authority and power.

The teleological model that the mosque participants seek to realize in their lives is predicated on the exemplary conduct of the Prophet and his Companions. It would be easy to dismiss this ideal as a nostalgic desire to emulate a bygone past, a past whose demands can never be met within the exigencies of the present. Yet to do so would be to miss the significance of such a telos for practical ethical conduct. Among mosque participants, individual efforts toward self-realization are aimed not so much at discovering one's "true" desires and feelings, or at establishing a personal relationship with God, but at honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self (see chapter 4). The women I worked with did not regard trying to emulate authorized models of behavior as an external social imposition that constrained individual freedom. Rather, they treated socially authorized forms of performance as the potentialities—the ground if you will—through which the self is realized. As a result, one of the questions this book raises is: How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality? In other words, how does one make the question of politics integral to the analysis of the architecture of the self?

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ETHICS AND POLITICS

Two objections may be raised to my proposal that we think about agency in terms of ethical formation, particularly in its Foucauldian formulation. One, it may be argued that despite my objections to a humanist understanding of the sovereign subject, I have in fact smuggled back in a subject-centered theory of agency by locating agency within the efforts of the self; and two, it may be argued that I have sidestepped the crucial question of politics and social transformation that the formulation of agency-as-resistance was primarily oriented to address. The first objection is, I believe, based on some common misunderstandings about what it means to say that the subject is an effect of power. It is often presumed that to speak about ethical self-formation necessarily requires a self-conscious agent who constitutes herself in a quasi-Promethean manner, enacting her will and hence asserting "her own agency" against structural forces. This presumption is incorrect on a number of scores. Even though I focus on the practices of the mosque participants, this does not mean that their activities and the operations they perform on themselves are products of their independent wills; rather, my argument is that these activities are the products of authoritative discursive traditions whose logic and power far exceeds the consciousness of the subjects they enable. The kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located. The women are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions, and they come to measure themselves against the ideals furbished by these traditions; in this important sense, the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts. Self-reflexivity is not a universal human attribute here but, as Foucault suggested, a particular kind of relation to oneself whose form fundamentally depends on the practices of subjectivation through which the individual is produced.

Let me now turn to the second objection: that my emphasis on agency as ethical self-formation abandons the realm of politics. This objection in some ways reflects an old distinction within liberal political theory that regards issues of morality and ethics as private, and issues pertaining to politics as necessarily public. This distinction is problematic for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the existence of a robust disagreement within the liberal tradition itself about the proper role ethics and virtues should, and do, play in the creation of liberal polities (see Pocock 1985; Skinner 1998). This compartmentalization of the ethical and the political is made all the more difficult to sustain if we take into account an insight that has become quite common-

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place in the academy today, namely that all forms of politics require and assume a particular kind of a subject that is produced through a range of disciplinary practices that are at the core of the regulative apparatus of any modern political arrangement.

While the validity of this insight is commonly conceded, the line of questioning is seldom reversed: How does a particular conception of the self require and presuppose different kinds of political commitments? Or to put it another way, what sort of subject is assumed to be normative within a particular political imaginary? Stating the question in this manner does not assume that the political ensues from the personal, precisely because, as I have argued above, the self is socially and discursively produced, an effect of operations of power rather than the progenitor of these operations. As such, an inquiry into the constitution of the self does not take the personal preferences and proclivities of the individual to be the object of study, but instead analyzes the historically contingent arrangements of power through which the normative subject is produced. I have found this framework particularly powerful insomuch as it helps denaturalize the normative subject of liberal feminist theory thereby making it possible to approach the lives of the mosque participants in ways not determined by the truths this body of scholarship asserts as universal.

Foucault's formulation of ethics suggests a means of inquiring into various techniques of subject formation, particularly within those traditions that place an emphasis on individualized (rather than juridical) modes of subjectivation. Political theorist William Connolly interprets Foucault's work on the arts of the self as an implicit acknowledgment of the crucial ways in which political engagement is not simply an abstract mode of deliberation but issues forth from "visceral modes of appraisal" (1999). Connolly challenges the regnant rationalist account of politics, arguing that political judgments do not simply entail the evaluation of moral principles but issue forth from intersubjective modes of being and acting that, while not always representable and enunciable, are nonetheless efficacious in regards to social and political behavior (Connolly 1999, 27–46).[53] Indeed, once we recognize that political formations presuppose not only distinct modes of reasoning, but also depend

[53] Connolly draws upon the work of a number of philosophers in making this argument. He writes: "Thinking itself for Deleuze (and Epicurus, Spinoza, Bergson, Freud, and Nietzsche too) operates on more than one level; it moves on the level of the virtual (which is real in its effectivity but not actual in its availability) and that of the actual (which is available to representation, but not self-sufficient). Infrasensible intensities of proto-thinking, for instance, provide a reservoir from which *surprise* sometimes unsettles fixed explanations, new *pressures* periodically swell up to disrupt existing practices of rationality, and new *drives to identity* occasionally surge up to modify the register of justice and legitimacy upon which established identities are placed" (1999, 40).

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upon affective modes of assessment, then an analysis of ethical practices of self-formation takes on a new, distinctly political, relevance. Nikolas Rose, who has explored the connection between Foucault's arts of the self and practices of governmentality in late-liberal Western societies, argues that analytical attention to ethico-politics "allows the possibility of opening up the education of forms of life and self-conduct to the difficult and interminable business of debate and contestation" (1999, 192). This is a point that resonates with a longstanding feminist insight that any political transformation necessarily entails working on those embodied registers of life that are often cordoned off from the realm of "pure politics."

ethics and agency

How does this intertwining of the ethical and the political impact my critique of regnant notions of agency within liberal-progressive accounts? First of all, as I hope I have made clear, I am not interested in offering *a* theory of agency, but rather I insist that the meaning of agency must be explored within the grammar of concepts within which it resides. My argument in brief is that we should keep the meaning of agency open and allow it to emerge from "within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself" (T. Asad 2003, 78). This is why I have maintained that the concept of agency should be delinked from the goals of progressive politics, a tethering that has often led to the incarceration of the notion of agency within the trope of resistance against oppressive and dominating operations of power. This does not mean that agency never manifests itself in this manner; indeed it sometimes does. But the questions that follow from this relatively simple observation are complicated and may be productively explored, I would suggest, through the nexus of ethics and politics.

Consider, for example, the fact that the practices of the mosque participants often pose a challenge to hegemonic norms of secular-liberal sociability as well as aspects of secular-liberal governance (see chapters 2 and 4). These challenges, however, have impacted conditions of secularity in a manner that has far exceeded both the intentionality of the pietists and the expectations of their most severe retractors. For example, as chapter 4 will show, the pietists' interpretation of Islamic rituals and observances has proved to be enormously unsettling to the state-oriented Islamists as much as their secular critics because of the implicit challenge this interpretation poses to key assumptions about the role ascribed to the body within the nationalist imaginary. As a result, the supposedly apolitical practices of the mosque movement have been

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met, on the one hand, with the disciplinary mechanisms of the state and, on the other hand, with a robust critique of this form of religiosity from secular-liberal Muslims and Islamist political parties who share a certain nationalist-identitarian worldview. One might say that the political agency of the mosque movement (the "resistance" it poses to secularization) is a contingent and unanticipated consequence of the effects its ethical practices have produced in the social field.

What I want to emphasize here are two interrelated points: first, that it is impossible to understand the political agency of the movement without a proper grasp of its ethical agency; and second, that to read the activities of the mosque movement primarily in terms of the resistance it has posed to the logic of secular-liberal governance and its concomitant modes of sociability ignores an entire dimension of politics that remains poorly understood and undertheorized within the literature on politics and agency.

Note that the activities of the mosque movement, like the rest of the piety movement, seldom engage those institutions and practices that are commonly associated with the realm of politics, such as participating in the electoral process, making claims on the state, using the judicial system to expand the place of religion in public life, and so on.[54] As a result it is easy to ignore the political character of this movement and for its activities to fall off the "political radar" of the analyst. Indeed, it is quite common for scholars to consider movements of this kind—movements that focus on issues of moral reform—apolitical in character (see, for example, Beinin and Stork 1997; Göle 1996; Metcalf 1993, 1994; Roy 1994). This characterization is a gross political and analytical mistake, however, because the transformative power of movements such as these is immense and, in many cases, exceeds that of conventional political groups. The political efficacy of these movements is, I would suggest, a function of the work they perform in the ethical realm—those strategies of cultivation through which embodied attachments to historically specific forms of truth come to be forged. Their political project, therefore, can only be understood through an exploration of their ethical practices. This requires that we rethink not only our conventional understanding of what constitutes the political but also what is the substance of ethics. Part of the analytical labor of this book is directed at addressing this challenge.

[54] This does not mean, of course, that the piety or women's mosque movement does not depend upon structures of modern governance for its organization. As my arguments in chapter 2 will make clear, modern political developments provide the necessary conditions for the emergence and flourishing of the piety movement in Egypt. What I am pointing out here is simply that the piety movement does not seek to transform the state or its policies but aims at reforming the social and cultural field.

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ethics and critique

A feminist concerned with relations of gender inequality might ask: How are we to think about the possibility of subverting and challenging those patriarchal norms that the mosque movement upholds? By untethering the concept of agency from that of progressive politics for the purpose of analytical clarity, have we abandoned any means of judging and critiquing which practices subordinate women and which ones allocate them some form of gender parity? Have I lost sight of the politically prescriptive project of feminism in pushing at the limits of its analytical envelope? The response to these questions cannot be given simply in a few phrases or paragraphs, but will, I hope, emerge within the course of this book. Here I only want to suggest some preliminary ways of thinking about these questions.

To begin with, the question of how the hierarchical system of gender relations that the mosque movement upholds should be *practically* transformed is, on the one hand, impossible to answer and, on the other hand, not ours to ask. If there is one lesson we have learned from the machinations of colonial feminism and the politics of "global sisterhood," it is that any social and political transformation is always a function of local, contingent, and emplaced struggles whose blueprint cannot be worked out or predicted in advance (Abu-Lughod 2002; Ahmed 1982; Lazreg 1994; Spivak 1987). And when such an agenda of reform is imposed from above or outside, it is typically a violent imposition whose results are likely to be far worse than anything it seeks to displace (see, for example, Collier 1997; Mani 1998; Massell 1974). As for how might we *theoretically* conceptualize resistance given the model of subjectivation undergirding the practices of the mosque movement, I will offer some thoughts in chapter 5 when I analyze the interrelationship between performativity, embodiment, and agency. Here, let it suffice to say that I think the issue of resistance to modes of domination cannot be asked outside of the embodied forms of attachment that a particular mode of subjectivation makes possible.

As to the question of whether my framework calls for the suspension of critique in regard to the patriarchal character of the mosque movement, my response is that I urge no such stance. But what I do urge is an expansion of a normative understanding of critique, one that is quite prevalent among many progressives and feminists (among whom I have often included myself). Criticism, in this view, is about successfully demolishing your opponent's position and exposing the implausibility of her argument and its logical inconsistencies. This, I would submit, is a very limited and weak understanding of the notion of critique. Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another's worldview, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know

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before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other.

It is in light of this expanded notion of critique that, during the course of my fieldwork, I was forced to question the repugnance[55] that often swelled up inside me against the practices of the mosque movement, especially those that seemed to circumscribe women's subordinate status within Egyptian society. This is a sentiment that I share with many secular progressives and liberals who feel a deep sense of discomfort when confronted with socially conservative movements of the kind I describe here—a sentiment that is continually brought home to me both in the sympathy I receive from audiences who marvel at my ability to withstand the asceticism of my informants' lives and in the anger my argumentative framework ignites for its failure to condemn my informants as "fundamentalists."[56]

My strategy in dealing with this repugnance has been to avoid the denunciatory mode that characterizes many accounts of the Islamist movement popular in the academy today. I find such a mode unhelpful in the task of understanding what makes these practices powerful and meaningful to the people who practice them. But more importantly, I have been fascinated and compelled by the repugnance the mosque movement provokes in feminist-progressive scholars like myself and by our inability to move beyond this visceral reaction. We might remind ourselves that the mosque movement (like the larger piety movement of which it is a part) is neither a fascist nor a militant movement, nor does it seek to gain control of the state and make Egypt a theocracy. As such, it is quite different from other politico-religious movements like the Hindutva movement in India, the Gush Emunim in Israel, the Jamāʿt al-Islāmi in Pakistan, or the international group al-Qāʿida. Yet the depth of discomfort the pietistic character of this movement evokes among liberals, radicals, and progressives alike is extraordinary.

I believe that one needs to unpack all that remains congealed under the admission that it is the "social conservatism" of movements like the piety move-

[55] This is a term I take from Elizabeth Povinelli's provocative discussion of how the discourse of multiculturalism is critically limited by what liberalism constructs as culturally "repugnant practices" (Povinelli 2002).

[56] Susan Harding observed over a decade ago that despite the increase in the study of "culturally marginal" groups within a range of academic disciplines, there is a marked absence of studies that focus on groups considered the "cultural and political Others" from the perspective of progressive-liberal scholars—such as the Protestant fundamentalist Harding writes about in the United States (Harding 1991). These "culturally repugnant" groups continue to be understood in oppositional terms—as antimodern, fundamentalist, backward, irrational, and so on—without any regard for how conditions of secular modernity have been crucial both to their production and their reception (see Harding 2000).

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ment that makes liberals and progressives uncomfortable, and to examine the constitutive elements and sensibilities that comprise this discomfort. This task takes on a particular urgency since the events of September 11, 2001, wherein a rather heterogeneous collection of images and descriptions associated with "Islamic social conservatism" (key among them, women's subordinate status in Muslim societies) are made to stand in for all that liberals and leftists are supposed to find threatening to their entire edifice of beliefs, values, and political system (see Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). In many ways, this book is an exploration of, to evoke Connolly again, the "visceral modes of appraisal" that produce such a reaction among many fellow liberal-left intellectuals and feminists, as much as it is an exploration of the sensibilities that animate such movements. The aim of this book, therefore, is more than ethnographic: its goal is to parochialize those assumptions—about the constitutive relationship between action and embodiment, resistance and agency, self and authority—that inform our judgments about nonliberal movements such as the women's mosque movement.

It is in the course of this encounter between the texture of my own repugnance and the textures of the lives of the women I worked with that the political and the ethical have converged for me again in a personal sense. In the course of conducting fieldwork and writing this book, I have come to recognize that a politically responsible scholarship entails not simply being faithful to the desires and aspirations of "my informants" and urging my audience to "understand and respect" the diversity of desires that characterizes our world today (cf. Mahmood 2001a). Nor is it enough to reveal the assumptions of my own or my fellow scholars' biases and (in)tolerances. As someone who has come to believe, along with a number of other feminists, that the political project of feminism is not predetermined but needs to be continually negotiated within specific contexts, the questions I have come to ask myself again and again are: What do we mean when we as feminists say that gender equality is the central principle of our analysis and politics? How does my enmeshment within the thick texture of my informants' lives affect my openness to this question? Are we willing to countenance the sometimes violent task of remaking sensibilities, life worlds, and attachments so that women of the kind I worked with may be taught to value the principle of "freedom"? Furthermore, does a commitment to the ideal of equality in our own lives endow us with the capacity to know that this ideal captures what is or should be fulfilling for everyone else? If it does not, as is surely the case, then I think we need to rethink, with far more humility than we are accustomed to, what feminist politics really means. (Here I want to be clear that my comments are not directed at "Western feminists" alone, but also include "Third World" feminists and all those who are located somewhere within this polarized terrain, since

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these questions implicate all of us given the liberatory impetus of the feminist tradition.)

The fact that I pose these questions does not mean I am advocating that we abandon our critical stance toward what we consider to be unjust practices in the situated context of our own lives, or that we uncritically embrace and promote the pious lifestyles of the women I worked with. To do so would be only to mirror the teleological certainty that characterizes some of the versions of progressive liberalism that I criticized earlier. Rather, my suggestion is that we leave open the possibility that our political and analytical certainties might be transformed in the process of exploring nonliberal movements of the kind I studied, that the lives of the women with whom I worked might have something to teach us beyond what we can learn from the circumscribed social-scientific exercise of "understanding and translation." In this sense, one can say that the tension between the prescriptive and analytical aspects of the feminist project can be left productively open—that it should not be prematurely foreclosed for the sake of "political clarity." As political theorist Wendy Brown reminds us, to "argue for a separation between intellectual and political life is not to detach the two. The point is to cultivate . . . an appreciation of the productive, even agonistic, interlocution made possible between intellectual life and political life when they maintain a dynamic distance and tension" (2001, 43).

If there is a normative political position that underlies this book, it is to urge that we—my readers and myself—embark upon an inquiry in which we do not assume that the political positions we uphold will necessarily be vindicated, or provide the ground for our theoretical analysis, but instead hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when we first embarked upon the inquiry.

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