Secular Assemblages

Affect, Orientalism and Power in the
French Enlightenment

MAREK SULLIVAN

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James Cox, Steven Sutcliffe and Will Sweetman

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Marek Sullivan

What then am I, my God? What is my nature? It is characterized by diversity, by life of many forms, utterly immeasurable. See the broad plains and caves and caverns of my memory. The varieties there cannot be counted, and are beyond any reckoning, full of innumerable things.
Augustine, Confessions *(1992 [397–400]: 194)*

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.
Edward Bernays, Propaganda *(1928: 9)*

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Preface

This book took shape against a background of massive upheavals in politics around the world. The traumatic events associated with Islamic State, followed by rising 'populism' on the left and right, an apparent unleashing of nationalist sentiment, isolationist fiscal and immigration policies focused especially on Brexit (at least in the UK), and the increasing dominance of political 'strongmen' like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Xi Jinping all created, and continue to create, the impression of a dramatic departure from received narratives concerning the progress of secular democracy. Prophets of modernity from Auguste Comte to Francis Fukuyama had led us to believe the world would gradually become more rational, more liberal, less religious, less selfish. Things just weren't supposed to go this way.

The tidal turn of the late 2000s and early 2010s was followed by shocking revelations, still ongoing, over the complicity of social media platforms in stoking political sentiments, and the unwillingness of CEOs to regulate data-collecting and sharing at a significant level. Each day sheds new light on the extent and nature of online political campaigns, waged through fine-tuned algorithms and the relentless propagation of individually tailored, emotionally valenced news. Again, these developments pose challenges to standard teleologies of the secular, by putting increasing pressure on rationalistic understandings of political discourse. Not only has there been a gradual dismantling of Rawlsian and Habermasian assumptions about the existence and rationality of the public sphere (accompanied by resignation in the face of religion's staying power), but a growing acceptance that reason may function less effectively than emotion in shaping the political *demos*. This change is not restricted to the 'affective turn', now well established in academic circles (Connolly 1999; Bennett 2001; Massumi 2002; Ahmed 2014), but extends to mainstream, if not popular, thought on the science of political mobilization. Discussing the issue of a democratic Brexit, children's author Philip Pullman has warned that the only way to change people's minds is through emotion since 'reason doesn't work' (2017, unpaginated). Filmed by undercover reporters in 2018, Mark Turnbull, the former managing director of Cambridge Analytica, confided:

> The two fundamental human drivers when it comes to taking information on board effectively are hopes and fears, and many of those are unspoken and even unconscious. You didn't know that was a fear until you saw something that evoked that reaction from you. And our job is … to drop the bucket further down the well than anybody else, to understand what are those really deep-seated underlying fears, concerns. It's no good fighting an election campaign on the facts, because actually it's all about emotion. (Channel 4 News 2018, 7:00–7:48)

The failure of mainstream institutions to anticipate and account for these changes has been accompanied by a predictable backlash from centrist supporters of the secular order, focused especially on the continuing relevance and value of the historical Enlightenment. Most recently, Steven Pinker has called for 'an Enlightenment newly recharged for the twenty-first century' (2018: jacket cover), against Brexit, Trump, political religion, nationalism, socialism and the parochial forces of a regressive 'Counter-Enlightenment'. Appeals to the Enlightenment have also come from more right-leaning though no less 'secular' circles. The 2000s saw the rise of 'patriotic atheism' (Bullivant 2010) epitomized by the so-called New Atheists (especially Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens), who have repeatedly demanded a 'new Enlightenment' against the ideological encroachment of Islam across Europe and America. Dutch nationalists Geert Wilders and Pim Fortuyn have warned that excessive Muslim immigration constitutes an attack on the 'fortress of Enlightenment' (Buruma 2006: 28–9).

Whether or not an abstract ideal of reason can resolve our current crisis, this book seeks to move away from simplistic dichotomies of rational/irrational – non-emotional/emotional, channelled through a historical opposition between the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment. Indeed, a principal intention here is to show that appeals to 'Enlightenment reason' as cannon fodder against political religion and rising nationalist sentiment are, in a profound sense, misplaced. They are misplaced for two reasons. First, because the historical Enlightenment, at least in its French variant, was anything but averse to emotional manipulation, especially when it came to nationalism. It is not the case that the Enlightenment sought to do away with emotion or 'overcome' our 'irrational passions' (Pinker 2018: 9). The tendency, as this book argues, was rather to channel the latter into the appropriate avenues for a viable nation-state. And second, because the Enlightenment was already a deeply xenophobic phenomenon – a fact which itself reflects its realpolitik approach to emotion. The Enlightenment deployed racist, Orientalist tropes, not (or not only) because the Enlightenment was racist and Orientalist in itself, but because it was

expedient for it to do so: Enlightenment xenophobia was a practical outcome of its demurral to affect, since it was clear to Enlightenment thinkers from Montesquieu to Holbach that racist affects provided a more potent means of bringing about social and political change (e.g. disestablishing the Catholic Church) than good reasons.

Right-wing politicians like Wilders, who seek to co-opt the prestige of Enlightenment reason in a defence of Western values, thereby squaring the circle of a rationalistic nationalism, might think twice about appealing to a historical phenomenon that was already aware of its power to manipulate people through a process of affective othering. In doing so, they become unwitting puppets of intellectual history, rehashing Enlightenment soundbites without any of the latter's self-awareness and scepticism. Indeed, it is no small irony that affect's shift to the mainstream and a concomitant explosion of Islamophobic sentiment in Europe and America in some ways marks the fulfilment of Enlightenment thought on the mechanics of public discourse, and a return to the rhetorical theory and method of the eighteenth century. Conversely, modern advocates of reason like Pinker, who seek succour in European intellectual history in the fight against modern, national passions, may find themselves short-changed on this front, since the Enlightenment was already a nationalistic and emotive phenomenon, based on a postrationalistic understanding of the political subject. It was not Cambridge Analytica but Claude Adrien Helvétius who, in 1758, called for a treatise on 'the art of inspiring [the passions]' (1759 [1758]: 217) that would bestow sovereignty on whoever mastered its secrets. Today we are closer than ever to this dream.

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A first book affords many opportunities, perhaps especially the opportunity to thank friends and colleagues for their support, whether recent or in the past. As the *philosophes* well knew, we are made by what surrounds us, or, to paraphrase Baron d'Holbach, 'the very particles we breathe'.

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Lastly, thank you to my mother for the love and strength, and for teaching me to question everything. And thank you to Arabella, for the swifts.

Note on translations

I have used existing translations where available and reliable. In certain cases, I have used my own translations to convey the significance of key terms and to sidestep an Anglophone tendency for rationalization. In other instances, I have used an adapted version of an existing translation (e.g. Henry Carey's translation of Jean-François Senault's *De l'Usage des Passions*, 1641) for convenience. All translations have been checked against the original texts.

Introduction

The 'deeply boring' case of Saint-Genis-Pouilly

On 8 December 2005, just seventy days after *Jyllands Posten* published a series of cartoons mocking Muhammed, and in direct response to the ensuing controversy, theatre director Hervé Loichemol staged Voltaire's 1741 play *Le Fanatisme* in the Genevese town of Saint-Genis-Pouilly. Loichemol had already attempted this once in 1993, on the occasion of Voltaire's 300th anniversary. But his plans had been thwarted by a chorus of complaints driven by scholar of Islam, Tariq Ramadan, and a battalion of leftist government officials charged with cultural affairs. In an open letter in October 1993, Ramadan described the play as 'one more stone in this edifice of hatred and rejection in which Muslims feel entrapped' and – to the outrage of many libertarian critics – appealed to 'tactfulness' against absolute principles of free speech and censorship (Ramadan 1993; Fourest 2007: 80). Geneva authorities eventually dropped the play, citing 'financial reasons' (Higgins 2006: unpaginated).

In 2005, the Enlightenment won out. *Le Fanatisme* was booked for two dates in the municipal theatre of Saint-Genis-Pouilly and Geneva's Théâtre Carouge. A small riot broke out on the first night: a car was burned and rubbish bins set on fire by local youths. Yet the play went ahead, protected by police reinforcements brought in by mayor Hubert Bertrand for the occasion. Although Bertrand expressed concerns about Muslim feelings, he also insisted on the sanctity of freedom of expression, the 'foundation stone of modern Europe'. He later belittled the riots as 'the most excitement we've ever had down here' (Higgins 2006).

One striking element of this drama is the way emotionality became mapped exclusively onto aggrieved Muslims. According to Andrew Higgins, writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, 'The production quickly stirred up passions that echoed the cartoon uproar'. Predictably, it was Muslims who 'raised a furore', not Loichemol (2006). For many critics of the Muslim reaction, not only was

this 'stirring of the passions' an illegitimate response, given its untranslatability into the language of secular reason, but it stemmed from a failure to grasp the metaphorical nature of the play. A correct approach began from the assumption that the play should be decoded into an alternative set of identities relevant to Voltaire's immediate context. As Ross Mullin wrote at the time, 'Voltaire wasn't actually attacking Mohammed. His main targets, thinly disguised, were religious fanaticism in general, and Christian fanatics in particular. When his play reached Paris on 9 August 1742, the right-wing Catholic Jansenists well knew at whom the barbs flew' (1994: unpaginated). According to François Rochaix, director of the Théâtre Carouge, *Le Fanatisme* 'is a metaphor and is not blasphemous' (Armanios 2005: unpaginated). Loichemol reminded 'the censors' that 'no one is forced to attend a theatre', and that those who cross the threshold accept entry into a 'game of identities' where 'interpretation is practiced' and truth emerges from 'an ironic exchange of significations' (2006: unpaginated). The same reasoning underpinned Rochaix's spurious claim that 'theatre has no taboos' (Armanios 2005). For Loichemol and Rochaix, speech regulations could have no bearing on the stage, since theatre-goers could always choose not to be harmed by properly interpreting the play, refusing to attend or making the appropriate aesthetic leap. (In the recent words of *Guardian* columnist Rachel Cooke, 'plays … don't groom people … Read a book or watch a play and see how you/we have changed'; 2017: unpaginated.)

By reaching into the past to disambiguate the metaphorical underside of *Le Fanatisme*, supporters of the play not only ignored its extraordinary flexibility as it journeyed across religious and political landscapes over nearly three centuries, but obfuscated the specific context of its performance in France in December 2005.[1] There was very little question over what it was intended to do or provoke at Saint-Genis-Pouilly. *Le Fanatisme* was performed explicitly as a response to the *Jyllands Posten* cartoons, in a context of heightened tensions between French Muslims and non-Muslims. The play was therefore more likely to challenge Muslims than Christian fanatics or religious fanaticism in general – a fact which, ironically, went against the grain of the Enlightenment. Jean Goldzink described the face off between Muslims and Loichemol as 'the same situation as in the eighteenth century': 'Then it was Catholic priests who were angry. Now it is parts of the Muslim community' (Higgins 2006: unpaginated). But it could only be the same if France had a twenty-first-century Muslim monarch, and non-Muslims had recently suffered a revocation of their right to practice, equivalent to Louis XIV's 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Voltaire's France was dominated by Catholicism and his work so powerful and vulnerable to censorship because

it spoke to, not for, power. Outside of this highly specific context and just two months after *Jyllands Posten*, the irony of the play easily collapsed into the veneer of representation. It would take a feat of self-reflexive detachment and contrivance to see Mahomet as anything other than Mahomet. No wonder Bertrand Hubert found the play 'deeply boring' (Higgins 2006: unpaginated).

The events at Saint-Genis-Pouilly became an important flashpoint of twenty-first-century debates about the place of Islam in Europe, free speech and the politics of representation. They demonstrated the ongoing relevance of the Enlightenment to recent permutations and refractions of religion, and the knotty relation between hermeneutics and power on the twenty-first-century stage. They also demonstrated a striking tendency to project the modern distinction between aesthetics and politics onto the past. For the idea that one could, or should, distance oneself from the enchantment of a play, aestheticize one's hurt and experience it as mere spectacle or an 'ironic exchange of significations' would have surprised Voltaire. Not only did Voltaire believe in the appropriateness of 'veiling' certain theatrical ideas and images, but he recognized and deliberately exploited theatre's privileged access to the formation of the emotional self.[2] In a letter to the King of Prussia, prefacing the 1753 edition of *Le Fanatisme,* Voltaire wrote: 'I have always believed that Tragedy must not be a mere Spectacle, which touches the heart without correcting it. What relevance do the passions and ill-fortunes of an Ancient Hero have for the Human Species if they do not serve to instruct us?' (1753b [1741]: unpaginated). The value of tragedy, for Voltaire, lay precisely in its power to 'touch the heart' and 'correct' it. The passions of classical heroes, properly rendered upon the stage, could not but shape our dispositions, uproot certain sentiments and 'instruct' us. Given that a strict distinction between the aesthetic and the private was not only undesirable but impossible, Voltaire took hold of this opportunity with enthusiasm and direction. His aim was precisely to provide a 'disloyal concurrence', an 'exercise in capturing spirits' (Loichemol 2006: unpaginated) that would, in Cooke's words, 'groom people'.

Can secularism be other-wise?

This is the question Saba Mahmood (2010) poses to Charles Taylor in an effort to fill a relative silence over representations of the other in his monumental work *A Secular Age* (2007). *Secular Assemblages* responds to this demand.

I take Mahmood's question as a call to problematize not only the lack of engagement with other places, other religions, other secularities (a problem

addressed elsewhere, e.g. by Pellegrini and Jakobsen 2008), but also the presumptions mapped onto others as a means of securing the legitimacy of the secular. This is about the dependence of the secular on these presumptions – presumptions which might entail a disavowal and projection of values and ideas associated with religion, such as immaturity, ignorance, emotionality or irrationality, onto the civilizational other, and the concomitant erasure of secularity's own religious or affective history. An 'other-wise' secularism will need to take stock of this history and proceed self-reflexively if it is to avoid reproducing a binary logic complicit in the legitimization of a Western imperialistic order.

Through a careful re-reading of canonical Enlightenment authors including Descartes, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Holbach and Helvétius, *Secular Assemblages* examines, first, the centrality of emotion, the 'passions' and the 'habits' to the foundations of eighteenth-century enlightened reform, and hence to the genealogy of the secular; and second, the historical entanglement of the secular with negative, affect-laden representations of Oriental religions, especially Islam. Against a tenacious assumption that the Enlightenment was fundamentally 'rationalistic' and blind or antithetical to the body, I show that, on the contrary, French thinkers of the eighteenth century were highly sensitive to issues of embodiment and emotion, and generally optimistic about the potential of the latter to support anti-religious, nationalist change. Like early propaganda theorist Edward Bernays, they were also keenly aware of the power of media and representation to mould people's 'habits and opinions' in favour of a post-religious, republican order in the early stages of mass print dissemination.[3] Highly affective representations of the Orient were therefore not mere aberrations – emotional challenges to Enlightenment 'rationalism' to be drawn out through a careful re-evaluation of Enlightenment literatures and material culture 'between the lines' – but a natural outgrowth of enlightened discourse on the power of emotional imagery to generate civic virtue and a sense of national belonging.

In what follows, I will outline what I take to be some common assumptions in the emerging field of secular studies, and outline the potential implications of a more body-centred and other-wise re-evaluation of secular history.

The secular body

In the opening lines of *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad asks whether 'the secular' and 'secularism' can be objects of anthropological enquiry,

and what this enquiry would look like (2003: 1). The question is knowingly controversial because the secular and secularism, whether taken as 'background understandings' of modern social life or 'foreground principles' (2) of political deliberation, typically evoke our natural condition once freed from the distortive effects of institutional religion. The taken-for-granted 'universal validity' (1) of secularism suggests a degree of cross-cultural translatability not granted to other politico-ethical frameworks under conditions of cultural and ethical plurality, making it *a priori* incompatible with the culturally relativizing project of social anthropology. To raise the question of its embeddedness in specific cultures – that is to say, its embodiment in historically contingent practices and disciplines of body and mind, specific to certain times and places (the modern West), and responsive to specific socio-political dilemmas (e.g. the wars of religion, the Catholic Church-state nexus) – is to undermine secularism's universalist thrust and the many violences this universalism legitimates across the world (Asad 2003; Cavanaugh 2009). A social anthropology of 'the secular' or 'secularism' is a *de facto* critique of the ideological basis of late-modern imperialism since it parochializes, historicizes or 'culturalizes' what is theoretically true and applicable for all times and places, and hence spreadable by force or consent.

By tying secularity to history and body, Asad instigates a new approach to the secular that directly reflects late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century historicizations and genealogies of its dialectical partner: 'religion' (e.g. W. C. Smith 1964; J. Z Smith 1982, 1998; Asad 1993). Since secularity and modern understandings of religion emerge simultaneously (Asad 2003; Cavanaugh 2009), it was only a matter of time before the first was subjected to the same treatment as the second. As Asad notes, 'religion and the secular are closely linked, both in our thought and the way they have emerged historically. Any discipline that seeks to understand "religion" must also try to understand its other' (2003: 22).[4]

Despite Asad's opening gambit, however, it remains unclear how 'the secular' or 'secularism' can – practically speaking – be read through a social-anthropological vocabulary of cultural sensibility, affect, practice and bodily discipline. As anthropologist Charles Hirschkind has noted, for books that seek to treat the secular or secularism as culturally embedded or embodied 'modes of appraisal', both *Formations* and William Connolly's equally body-centric *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (1999) largely sidestep descriptions of secular 'self-cultivation or practices of self-discipline' (2011: 636). While Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) provided a densely woven survey of medieval Christian sensitivities, practices, disciplines and forms of devotion, *Formations* and *Why I Am Not*

skirt around sustained engagement with their secular equivalents. Indeed, 'we find very little in these books in regard, not only to how the sensibilities and visceral modes of judgment of secular subjects are cultivated but also how they give shape to and find expression in a secular life' (Hirschkind 2011: 635). Asad and Connolly's relative silence on this point leads Hirschkind to a narrower set of questions, focused more precisely on the body: 'Is there a secular body?' or more specifically, 'is there a particular configuration of the human sensorium – of sensibilities, affects, embodied dispositions – specific to secular subjects, and thus constitutive of what we mean by "secular society"?' (633).

Hirschkind himself defaults on a substantive answer, explaining Asad and Connolly's silence in terms of at least two restrictions on the project itself: the methodologically impenetrable character of its subject material (secularism, according to Asad, can only be approached 'through its shadows', since it is the 'water we swim in') and the inherent aversion of secularism to visceral or embodied registers of subjectivity. On this account, the secular body eludes enquiry because 'a secular person is someone whose affective-gestural repertoires express a negative relation to forms of embodiment historically associated with (but not limited to) theistic religion' (638). In other words, the question of a secular body is either moot or theoretically limited, since 'the most visceral element' of the discourses identified by Connolly and re-presented by Hirschkind as 'secular' is their 'rejection of the visceral dimension itself' (636).

In his support, Hirschkind cites the sixteenth- to eighteenth-century 'desensualization' of knowledge analysed by Walter Ong (2005 [1958]), the 'stilling of passionate expression within courtly society' examined by Norbert Elias (1994 [1939]) and Kant's 'dinner party scene', originally featured in Connolly (1999), which he reads as 'a pedagogical device geared to disciplining the emotions and attitudes of a secular subject' (637). This scene, which prescribes a set of social manners appropriate to the Kantian host (such as avoiding contentious topics, 'deadly silence', etc.), is apparently suggestive of a move towards the suppression of excessive emotionality, itself tied to the experiential domain of religion. The party scene functions by analogy as a regulatory blueprint for the control and suppression of religious affects 'in accord with the doctrine of political secularism' (638). Kantian and neo-Kantian political philosophies (e.g. Rawls, Habermas) are seen to carry forward this political project by facilitating the regulation of religion in public life through a continuous devaluation of the sensual register, and transfer of 'vast realms of experience from the surface of public life' to 'the invisible depths of the lonely individual' (638). Since this transfer jettisons

valuable resources for a rich and healthy sphere of political debate, and is in fact impossible anyway (religious affects always seep into political discourse whether we like it or not), scholars like Connolly have sought to rehabilitate religious discourse as a valuable asset for ethical and political deliberation.

Important as this rehabilitation may be, neither Connolly nor Hirschkind radically question the implied link between religion, embodiment and emotion, and secularization, disembodiment and non-emotion backgrounding these debates. Why has religion been made the carrier of emotions and secularity the domain of a pure and disembodied rationality? On whose terms? Why has Kant come to stand for the history of the secular?[5] These questions are important because there is a sense in which Connolly and Hirschkind's analyses, while casting a critical eye over secular thought and practice to challenge negative accounts of political emotionality, may in fact contribute to a reproduction of secular categories and their attendant anti-religious bias by tying religion to the emotional body and leaving secularism's own affective history untouched.[6] For both, the secular is simply what religion runs up against: the unemotional counterpart to religion's more depth-sensitive catalogue of affects. But can we plot a history of affects distinctive to secular space, that is, one not defined solely in terms of its rejection of religious emotion?

Critical secular studies

The supposed tendency for secularization to bring about a suppression of emotional or sensual life, and thus to elide – conceptually and practically – more embodied forms of religious commitment and devotion, also backgrounds a wider set of questions about contemporary secularism and its troubled confrontation with 'resurgent' forms of religion the world over, arguably resurgent less because religion really is growing, than because it has become more visible in a presumed secular context. For many, this increased visibility stems from the difficulty of shoehorning non-Christian-Protestant religion into a legal and political structure shaped by a predominantly Protestant or Kantian history. A range of scholars have recently focused their attention on the failure of secular frameworks to recognize and cope with forms of religion not built on Western templates. Saba Mahmood (2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010) has written extensively on the secular state's convenient blindness to, and antipathy for, the embodied, virtue-centred nature of Muslim devotional practice. Since secular rule, embedded in a predominantly Protestant history, tends only to validate

forms of religion that suppress public action and sentiment in favour of an inoffensive (because private) 'cognitive assent to sets of propositions', Muslim offence (e.g. to the *Jyllands Posten* cartoons) remains usefully incomprehensible to Western sensibilities and stands out as a marker of cultural and ethnic difference.

In fact, as Mahmood, William T. Cavanaugh (2009) and Mayanthi Fernando (2014) have argued, the secular state *requires* that 'virtue-centred' or embodied modes of religiosity remain both highly visible and indecipherable to discourses of religious freedom, since this visible opacity allows the construction of a crypto-Protestant democratic standard from which non-Protestant (e.g. Muslim) communities and practices will always seem to be deviating.[7] If Muslims are incapable of drawing the line between text and truth, signifier and signified, and thus tempering their (always 'emotional', 'fanatic') reactions to 'mere' images, perhaps they should relocate elsewhere – a gesture of exclusion that generates and strengthens the boundaries assumed to have been transgressed and weakened by the presence of the other.[8] According to Fernando (2014), the persistent failure of immigrant religions to integrate in French culture, far from a corrosive anti-national force, supports the national bond by opening a space for the endless reiteration of 'national values' against the perceived threat of religious and ethnic alterity. While portraying itself as protective of universal religious rights and freedoms, this discourse tacitly legitimizes discrimination against particular religious groups, reinforcing the unassimilable nature of 'Muslim-French' identity and, by implication, the integrity of France and Frenchness as distinct culturo-ethnic categories.[9]

The operative assumption here is that secularism or the secular – articulated through a Lockean or neo-Kantian language of belief as internal, private or distillable to 'sets of propositions' to which one assents – offers up a hermeneutic lens inherently incapable of dealing (if not unwilling to deal) with embodied forms of religious life, especially those originating in other cultures. And indeed, there is now a rich secondary literature on the tensions and contradictions crossing through secularism and its attendant ethos of religious freedom, much of it highly sensitive to issues of embodiment, colonial representation and power. Twenty-first-century scholars of the secular have done much to unmask secularism as an inherently unstable political doctrine and/or legal principle, wrenched apart by incompatibilities between its constitutive pillars, e.g. disestablishment and freedom to practice, and ridden with Eurocentric biases bleeding through the fault lines (e.g. Mahmood 2009; Fernando 2014; Pellegrini 2015; Sullivan et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, Lockean and Kantian curations of secular intellectual history – even in critical work like Mahmood, Fernando, Hirschkind and Connolly's – arguably risk shoring up a secular-rational/religious-emotional double binary useful to secular power, since it is this binary that enables secular (Western) violence to be presented as 'rational' and religious (subaltern) violence not. To the extent this binary is left unchallenged, European discrimination against non-Western forms of 'embodied' religion (e.g. Islam) can be framed as a logical necessity inherent in the doctrine of secularism rather than a political decision based on the arbitrary, but historically highly determined, circumscription of non-native, 'emotion-driven' cultures.[10] It is precisely this possibility that allows European secular-nationalists like Geert Wilders and Pim Fortuyn to proclaim the universal values of the Enlightenment, yet insist on the Christian (i.e. Western, European) heritage of those very same values.[11] In this context, simply pointing out that the secular has a Protestant (= Lockean, Kantian) history no longer has any bite, since it merely confirms what secular-nationalists wish to believe: that the Enlightenment is both 'theirs' and distillable to a universalist, anti-corporeal rationalism denying more embodied dimensions of religious subjectivity, such as the religious offence or 'pain' (Mahmood 2009) caused by pictographic representations of Muhammed. Again, the political stakes of an anthropology of the secular or secularism that does not hedge on the possibility of a history of secular affects should be clear.

Thus, to reframe Asad's questions in historical terms, can we reconstruct a history of the secular body that does not rule out secular affectivity in principle? And what would this history look like?

A secular age

Like Asad, Hirschkind takes the secular to be 'conceptually prior to the political doctrine of secularism' and hence 'part of the background presupposed by our routine ways of distinguishing secular from religious in law, politics, ethics, and aesthetics' (2011: 633; Asad 2003: 16). In this view, the secular is still a concept, but one that precedes any kind of political-theoretical prescriptive content, e.g. concerning the proper relation of church and state. His understanding of the secular is more encompassing. For Hirschkind, the secular is 'a concept that articulates a constellation of institutions, ideas, and affective orientations that constitute an important dimension of what we call modernity and its defining forms of knowledge and practice – both religious and nonreligious' (634). As

previously mentioned, it is also 'the water we swim in' and therefore difficult to analyse objectively; it cannot be tackled head-on, but rather 'through its shadows'.

Given this theoretical background, it is perhaps surprising that Hirschkind does not mention Charles Taylor's discipline-defining *A Secular Age* (2007; henceforth *ASA*), despite the fact his work appeared four years before Hirschkind's essay and provides one of the richest analyses of secular experience and embodiment to date. For Taylor, as for Asad and Hirschkind, the secular is irreducible to a political concept: it is the background frame – conceptual, phenomenological, affective – for the 'lifeworld' and 'social imaginary' of the modern West. Taylor patiently (over almost 800 pages) reconstructs the many lifeworlds generated and inhabited by Western subjects in the genesis of secular modernity, drawing on popular literatures, theological, philosophical and political-theoretical thought, and a wealth of social-scientific historical data. His understanding of secularity is thus deliberately vaguer yet richer and more generously encompassing than modern political-theoretical conceptions of the secular that seek to disambiguate or 'decontest' (Freeden 2007) what it means to 'be secular' (e.g. Berlinerblau 2012, 2014). For Taylor, such conceptions, while useful in a limited sphere of application (e.g. dedicated projects of socio-political reform), are merely one facet of an expansive and ultimately irreducible socio-historical phenomenon.

At the core of Taylor's analysis are three types or modes of secularity: 1, 2 and 3. Secularity 1 refers to a normative distinction between church and state; secularity 2 to a general scepticism towards religious truth claims and institutions; and secularity 3 to the most generalizable feature of the modern secular and central focus of *ASA*: the awareness that belief is, for most people in most of the West, no longer a compulsory dimension of social life, but rather 'one human possibility among others' (3). Tied up with this pluralization and relativization of belief/ non-belief is an increased phenomenological isolation, whereby bodies formerly located in a complex ecology of visible and invisible beings are cut off and revealed as self-standing, autonomous agents locked in the confines of an unprecedentedly materialistic 'immanent frame'. This isolated, 'disenchanted' secular subject is what Taylor calls the 'buffered self' (27): a self whose self-awareness (or, less cognitively, 'sense of self') as a being hermetically insulated from other beings, and naturally endowed with certain rights (to personal property, freedom of conscience, etc.), is much stronger than at any other point in history. As he sums it up elsewhere, 'One of the big differences between us and them is that we live with a much firmer sense of the boundary between self and other' (2011: 302–3).

In a certain sense, Taylor's 'buffered self' *is* Hirschkind's 'secular body'. Where Hirschkind connects the secular body to a rejection of the visceral

dimension articulated through Kant, Taylor connects bufferedness with the rise to hegemony of 'disengaged reason' (especially via Descartes), Hume and Gibbon's 'ironic distance' and Kant's eschewal of 'our embodied feeling, our "gut reactions" in determining what is right' (137, 241, 286, 301, 288; 2011: 34, 35). He also – like Hirschkind – cites Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* (1994 [1939]) as demonstrative of a historical shift away from the body and emotions, and adds Jürgen Habermas's (1989 [1962]) neo-Kantian concept of the public sphere as a means of theorizing the rationalization of political authority in the transition from monarchic to democratic government. Taylor thereby advances almost exactly the theory of rational disengagement advocated by Hirschkind as constitutive of the secular, going so far as to suggest that secularization has brought us to a contemporary situation in which we tend, more than our ancestors, to 'live in our heads' (2007: 555).

The richness of Taylor's analysis, its theoretical focus on the experiential and affective (not simply political or legal) dimensions of secular life and its importance for the emerging field of secular studies, make it an exceptionally relevant source for thinking through the nature and genealogy of secular embodiment. As I will show, it is also a paradigmatic example of the way historiographies of the secular – even those that take a neutral or antipathetic stance towards classical secular ideology – still tend to operate within a set of coordinates driven by secular self-understandings. Though critical of secularist attempts to drive a wedge between religion and the secular, Taylor, like Hirschkind, still links secularity or secularization to a loss of contact with the body in favour of an abstracted ideal of pure reason, thereby reproducing a typically secularist association between religion and embodied or 'engaged' emotionality.

I do not think this association stands up to scrutiny. The secular is, by almost any measure, as embodied or emotionally entangled as 'religion' (Mahmood 2009; Calhoun 2010). Nevertheless, Taylor's complex socio-intellectual analysis provides a strong starting point for constructing a revised genealogy of the secular, one sensitive to ongoing forms of porosity and embodiment in our secular age, and one that does not defer to Kantian rationalism as the paradigm shaper of secular history. Insofar as a secular body exists, and insofar as we can plot its genetic make-up through an analysis of Western intellectual history, *ASA* provides the most comprehensive attempt so far to flesh out (or, as it happens, unflesh) the secular body through time. It therefore stands out as a particularly relevant foil for a comprehensive history of secular affectivity. But what grounds are there for questioning Taylor's narrative?

Reembodying the secular

Consider the following two quotations:

> [M]y physical delight, which has to be checked from enervating the mind, often deceives me when the perception of the senses is unaccompanied by reason, and is not patiently content to be in a subordinate place. It tries to be first and to be in the leading role, though it deserves to be allowed only as secondary to reason.

> [T]he objects of the passions produce movements in the blood which follow so rapidly from the mere impressions formed in the brain and the disposition of the organs, without any help at all from the soul, that no amount of human wisdom is capable of counteracting these movements when we are not adequately prepared to do so. Thus many people cannot keep from laughing when they are tickled, even though they get no pleasure from it. For the impression of joy and surprise, which previously made them laugh for the same reason, is awakened in their imagination and causes their lungs to be swollen suddenly and involuntarily by blood sent to them from the heart.

As mentioned above, Taylor situates a key moment for the genealogy of the secular, and especially the buffered self of secular modernity, in the figure of Descartes. According to Taylor, Descartes's 'neo-Stoicism' yoked the body and passions to the hegemony of the rational will, or 'disengaged reason', thereby downgrading the role of the body, sensations and emotions in the constitution of knowledge, behaviour, 'the good' and the fully realised, immanently self-transparent individual. It is a classic anti-corporeal or at least body-insensitive interpretation of Descartes, usually illustrated by his epistemological deference to the authority of the *cogito*.

The first passage would seem to confirm this interpretation, if it had been written by Descartes. It was in fact written by Augustine of Hippo (1992 [397–400]: 207–8) around 1200 years earlier.[12] The second passage, describing bodily stimulations that 'no amount of human wisdom is capable of counteracting' when we are not prepared, was written by Descartes in his final work *Les Passions de l'Âme* (1985a [1649]: 403). Separated by more than a millennium, Augustine's and Descartes's understandings of reason were different. Yet the essential structure opposing abstract reason and the physical body (or 'the perception of the senses') is precisely mirrored in both authors' works, and – at least here – in the opposite order to Taylor's rationalistic narrative of the secular.

In making this observation, I do not mean to suggest that Augustine was a rationalist and Descartes an anti-rationalist. My point is not to reverse but to complicate Taylor's narrative, by highlighting alternative ways of constructing

Western intellectual history embedded in the very same, contradictory set of materials. At stake here is a wider issue about the way intellectual histories take shape, and the meta-historiographical framework by which certain narratives predominate over others. How do these passages fit into a historical schema plotting the development of our secular age as a gradual process of emancipation from the body and its enmeshment in the world? What presumptions allow Taylor to construe secularization (and especially the European Enlightenment) as the ideological focal point for the rise to hegemony of disembodied reason, given the predominance of anti-corporeal, rationalistic strands within ancient Christianity, and the stubborn presence of the body in later secularizing discourse?

As we shall see, the idea that the body and its affects can or should be isolated from secular aims would have seemed strange to many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theorists of the self, especially those concerned with forging new, stable models of political organization in a post-revolutionary, post-religious state. The re-creation of a universal basis for good behaviour and the moral obligations of citizenship was, for Enlightenment philosophers from Montesquieu to Holbach, as much a matter of feeling as ideas and reason. Indeed, secular discourse of the time is crossed through with the language of emotionality and passions, a trend that continued into the nineteenth century when, according to Martha Nussbaum, philosophers became 'obsessed' with 'civic emotion' (2013: 55). The primary target of Enlightenment anti-religion was not religious passionality – from a secular perspective this was negligible or non-existent, except in the case of extreme fanaticism – but a split allegiance to the state and supra-national institution of the Catholic Church, as evidenced by authors as wide-ranging as Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Holbach and Helvétius.[13] The aim was not so much to kill off religious sentiment, as redirect it away from the Catholic Church, both inwards towards private virtue and outwards towards the nation-state, so that the cultivation of one became the cultivation of the other. The early modern citizen was thus shaped by a kind of mutually reinforcing *habitus* in which true moral progress would be achieved by harmonizing personal and national motivations. Citizens were held in a secular project of justification by civility alone through which 'the new religion of national identity' (Rothschild 2001: 248) could flourish unimpeded.

This new religion was not – could not be – based on a suppression or erasure of religious affect. On the contrary, powerful emotions were often encouraged and cultivated, so long as they harmonized with the nation-building project.[14] In this respect, it is useful to distinguish three terms that Taylor tends to