Is There a Secular Tradition? On Treason, Government, and Truth

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IS THERE A SECULAR TRADITION? ON TREASON, GOVERNMENT, AND TRUTH

by

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A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Abstract

Is There a Secular Tradition? On Treason, Government, and Truth

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“Because the secular is so much part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp it directly,” writes Talal Asad, in the introduction to his Formations of the Secular. This thesis attempts to obliquely engage with secular power through a concept that has been at the center of much contention in our political present: treason. Taking the failed coup of July 16 and the ensuing purge against the Gülen movement in Turkey as its points of departure, it seeks to broach some of the constitutive and operative logics of the modern nation-state. Inquiring into the State’s perennial presupposition of conspirators from within, in addition to its correlative techniques devised to preemptively identify and expose those subjects, it gestures to arrive at a better understanding of some of the productive qualities of secular power.
In Memory of Bekir Dildar
Table of Contents

Introduction 1
A Digression into Tradition 4
The Hyphenation of the Nation-State 13
On Government and Truth 20
Epilogue: On Treason and Tradition 26

Bibliography 30
**Introduction**

For some time now, I’ve been preoccupied with thinking about divergent vantages from which to address and engage with secular power. My curiosity is partly the consequence of an all too common tendency to conceptualize secular states, tenets, institutions, practices, beliefs, *et al.*, as diametrically opposite to a set of respective counterparts in a domain objectively labeled *religious*. Such dichotomized conceptualization of the secular and the religious, as banal and reductive as it is, not only undergirds much of the vocabulary of foreign policy officials and experts, but also informs an array of conceptual distinctions that dictate intellectual and scholarly engagement on related issues. These taxonomical distinctions are evidentiary in countless op-eds or editorials that have as their objects “Islamist” movements or “secularist” governments. Corollaries to these reductive formulations run the gamut from bemusement at democratic practices of “Islamist” governments to the exposed partiality of “secular” states vis-à-vis religious neutrality, and are apparent no less in analyses of the qualitative differences between religious and secular violence. As heterogeneous as these accounts may be, underlining all is an elision in engaging with the productive qualities of secular power.

In problematizing this reductive project of binarization and in pointing to some of its resultant contradictions, I must note that my point isn’t that we ought to simply only do away with the categorizations of *types* of violence (e.g., religious or secular), but rather interrogate the epistemological underpinnings of such accounts, and perhaps via a method of genealogy, their long histories, as well as their embeddedness in specific discursive milieus. As amorphous as concepts of religion have been, a cohesive historiography of the study of myriad traditions has enabled its constitution as object of inquiry. One is reminded here of the rich and contentious history of anthropological writings, and debates within that field, on religious belief, rituals and
practices. Yet the fecundity of scholarship on varying religious traditions and on their accompanying rituals, beliefs and practices is offset by a curious scarcity of scholarship on that tradition which it is conventionally conceptualized as the opposite of: the secular. In fact, a study of syllabi in anthropology departments across U.S. universities reveals a stark asymmetry between the number of courses taught on religious and secular traditions, with numbers heavily favoring the former.¹

The reasons for this striking lacuna are perhaps manifold; but the most significant one, I think, echoing Talal Asad, is the proximity of our emplacement within the secular paradigm.² Put differently, in terms borrowed from anthropologist Charles Hirschkind, the paucity of scholarship on secularity may well arise from “the difficulty of establishing an analytical distance from what is clearly a foundational dimension of modern life. The secular is the water we swim in.”³ This is precisely the reason Asad suggests exploring the secular indirectly; “through its shadows,” as it were, in his sketches of how to conceive of an anthropology of the secular. I believe there is ample ground for this sort of work to be undertaken in not only the discipline of anthropology, but in the humanities generally.

This essay proceeds, then, as an exploration of a concept that has been at the center of much contention in our political present: treason. One of its many variations, treason against the State, constitutes the supreme transgression of law, and elicits an extraordinarily emotive response from not only State officials but fellow citizens alike. What can the infusion of betrayal, ever-present in charges of treason, with a legal transgression tell us about some of the constitutive and operative

²Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular, 16.
logics of the nation-state? To what extent does the distinguishability between friend and enemy inform the State’s security paranoia regarding its unwavering presupposition of the presence of conspirators within? How do we conceptualize the sort of power that this discipline works through? Put differently, underlying the line that divides community and ostracization, enemy and friend, loyalist and traitor, what are the distinctive techniques of secular power? And just as significantly, what does this power do?

These are some of the questions that orient my preoccupation in this essay. As the Western hemisphere reels from a troubling upsurge in the popularity of xenophobic, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee politics, conceptions of fealty to the sovereign state and the nation appear to wax in rhetorical currency. State paranoia regarding attacks from without that have been especially pungent in the post 9/11 era, have now begun to be paralleled with a profound security preoccupation to devise techniques to expose treasonous individuals—conspirators from within. Ever-permeating, this preoccupation is perennially informed by an anxiety that is evidentiary in a panoply of cases: from doubts expressed regarding a U.S. Supreme Court Justice’s fidelity given their foreign ancestry, to explicit calls for the execution of whistleblowers who’ve divulged state-secrets.  

To work through some of the questions I’ve posed above, in this paper I will primarily draw on the failed coup that occurred in July 2016 in Turkey, with charges of treason as the fulcrum around which my exploration will turn. In Part I, I offer a reading of the purge against the Gülen movement, an amorphous religious organization that is claimed to be a leading conspirator in the

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4 Current U.S. President Donald J. Trump famously called for the execution of Edward Snowden, who, during his tenure working for the NSA divulged a trove of top-secret intelligence files implicating the U.S. in unauthorized mass-collection of data on citizens and non-citizens alike.  
said coup attempt. The installment of an indefinite State of Emergency by the ruling party, and the
hasty denouncement which has led to the imprisonment of scores of individuals suspected to be
affiliated with the Gülen movement, I contend, provides us with an unusual example to consider
the imbrication between the State and the Nation—an instance which, I believe, just as
significantly complicates those accounts that posit the State as an abstract entity which hovers
above the social paradigm.

In Part II, I take a closer look at some of the distinctive mechanisms of secular power
operational in the State’s zeal to expose, and in consequence deal with, individuals whom the State
claims have been, or in the future could be, involved in treasonous activities. The logic of such
techniques that undergird the security State we inhabit are not unique to the predicament in Turkey,
but are operative in all nation-states. Thus in section II, I focus particularly on the relationship
between truth acts and governmentality. Finally, in Part III, I turn to and conclude with an
exploration of treason and potentiality.

A Digression into Tradition

I start by situating my purpose in this piece by engaging with a series of essays that appeared in a
special issue of Boundary 2 in Spring 2013, titled “Antinomies of the Postsecular”. Outlining its
purpose as an engagement with a growing “postsecular tendency” in the humanities (claimed to
be especially prevalent in postcolonial studies departments by one of the contributors), in the
introduction, editor Aamir Mufti, states that the contributors’ objective is “to see not only what
kinds of questions were being asked about this supposed [religious] return…but also, perhaps more
importantly, what kinds of questions were being foreclosed”—as evinced in efforts of this
“postsecular tendency”. Although the entire volume warrants lengthy analytical engagement, due

to the limited scope of this essay, and in hopes of keeping this digression still fruitful for my purposes, here I will limit my discussion to only Part 1 of the Issue, comprised of a series of essays all entitled “Why I Am Not a Postsecularist”.

To begin with, let us take Mufti’s account of what he perceives to be an overlapping gesture between the mainstream media and U.S. foreign policy experts on the one hand, and the so called postsecularist scholars on the other—the former in positing a “return of the religious,” and the latter in its complicit reification of the same phenomena. He avers that a wide array of commentaries on Muslims and Islam, from

The new atheists to some of the new and important anthropological scholarship on Islam, seem to be in agreement in one important respect about what this term signifies: they tend to view varieties of contemporary political Islam as representative of the (Sunni) Islamic “tradition” as such. The assumption appears to be that as a spiritual, intellectual, and political culture, Islamism marks a “return” of Islam, either uncontaminated by, or having shaken itself free of, the liberal thought and practice of the modern West. Behind this equation of Islamism with Islam is a larger set of assumptions about the contemporary crisis of the postcolonial world more broadly, understood in terms of the loss and attempted recuperation of past social and cultural forms—in the terms, in other words, of a “jargon of authenticity”

Censuring this “new anthropology of Islam” further (Mufti’s polemic is leveled at Talal Asad and those anthropologists that have been directly influenced by his work, including Saba Mahmood, et al.), Mufti charges this type of scholarship with the erasure of the multifarious forms of “Islamic religiosity,” and in consequence, “leaving only the configuration of contemporary political Islam, theologically diverse but nevertheless Salafi-revivalist in its constitutive gestures, available to the effort to conceptualize the interaction of secular and religious imaginations and spaces in modern Muslim societies.”

Instead, he argues, the colonial moment ought to be theorized as the victorious event of Sunni Islam, demarcating the codification of shari’a as law, which, according to Mufti,

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7 Ibid, p. 11.
is directly inherited from the colonial employment of law as technique of government. Salafism (reductively used interchangeably with Islamism in this case by Mufti), by extension of his argument, is better conceived as a “majoritarian doctrine of the modern state”. And in sum, “contemporary Islamism thus marks not a return of religion (Islam) but rather its historical transformation under the conditions of late, postcolonial capitalism.”

Mufti then moves on to critique what he perceives to be a tension between the approaches in conceiving the West and Islam, respectively, in Asad’s work. Asad’s genealogical method, he asserts, takes the West exclusively as its object while Islam is merely identified and explicated as a tradition: “it is notable that Asad’s genealogical exercises are directed at “Western” practices, notably any practice that might broadly be subsumed under the rubric of secularism (as secularized Christianity). When it comes to Islam, all we are left with is “tradition.” This misplaced criticism of Asad’s concept of tradition, and Mufti’s perceived tension between the latter’s genealogical approach and conception of tradition, is of much significance for it aptly delineates crucial shortcomings present in his formulation.

In objurgating the “postsecularist” school’s move that associates Islamism, or political Islam with Sunni Islam—in other words, gesturing towards a continuity between Islamism and Islam—Mufti himself inevitably invokes a problematic separation between the two. Here one need not be reminded that the majority of the groups that are objectively labeled “Islamists” simply consider themselves to be pious, devout Muslims. Nevertheless, Mufti is indeed correct in pointing out that the organizational structures of myriad “Islamist” movements are indisputably shaped by effects of the colonial project, and yet it isn’t clear why (an essential?) Islam is differentiated from the Islam that is embodied, practiced and envisioned by members of Islamist groups. At the crux

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8 Ibid, p. 12.
of Mufti’s riposte to the postsecularist trend, then, rests a teleological view of the secularist project: the characterization the rise of political Islam in the post 9/11 era as “the religious turn,” and more specifically, the association of this sort of Islam “as representative of the (Sunni) Islamic tradition,” is refuted precisely on the grounds that traditional Islam has been tainted by the colonial project and thereby transmogrified into “contemporary Islamism”.10

In other words, accrediting Islamist movements with an authenticity that in turn allows for their inclusion as part of the Islamic tradition results in an understanding of Islamism “as an expression of religious consciousness directed against the inroads of secularism, which itself is viewed simply as an ideological impulse of the ongoing projects of Western imperialism.”11 What we’re left with is an account that takes for granted the entelechy of secularism in that political Islam—an irrevocably distorted, unconscious distortion of that tradition—is separated from a true Sunni Islam—a move that turns on a static, immutable conception of that tradition. Hence the prefix “post” is obviated from “postsecular” simply because the process of secularization, in Mufti’s account, is incomplete.12

A striking pitfall in this account, of course, is the sweeping homogenization (and thereby equation) of a plethora of movements across the globe under the rubric “Islamist”. Not only do politically organized movements that invoke Islam vary across nations, but a profound diversity of opinions, agreements and disagreements regarding the aspirations and the disparate means through which to achieve those objectives, are discernible within each specific current. One is reminded here of the state-enforced dissolution of the Virtue (Fazilet) Party (a successor to the

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10 Ibid, p. 10.
11 Ibid, p. 11.
12 Implicit as this point may be in Mufti’s account, the idea that secularization isn’t complete, and far more importantly, that it ought not to be complete, is asserted rather explicitly by Stathis Gourgouris in his piece in this series.
Welfare Party of the conservative National Vision (Milli Gorus) movement) in Turkey in 2001, whose alleged pursuit of an “Islamist” agenda was ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. Presented with the option of forming yet another party after Welfare’s (Refah) dissolution, disagreements irrupted within the group, resulting in the splitting of standing members between hard-liners and reformists—the latter of which included in its ranks Abdullah Gül and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who would form the Justice and Development Party (AKP) shortly thereafter. Even a cursory study of how hasty and dramatic both Erdogan’s and Gul’s ideological evolution have been since the 90’s would attest to the continuous refashioning that is part and parcel of Islamist politics. Yet the diversity and the conscious deliberation I’ve just alluded to shouldn’t be taken to have implications solely for Islamism, but far more importantly, I suggest it should alert us to the erroneous temporalization—religion succeeded by secularism—that some critics of “postsecularists” perhaps unwittingly employ in their accounts.

Again, I must emphasize that my point in critiquing Mufti’s invective against “the new anthropology of Islam” isn’t that Islamism is identifiable with a locatable other—be it an institution, school of thought, or belief system—named Islam, but rather that Islamist currents are borne of a tradition, discursive and empirical, which inheres disagreements as well as agreements that enable the incessant evolution, and reconfiguration, of that tradition. It is Mufti’s static conceptualization of tradition that creates a sense of incommensurability between Islam, which presumably Mufti would categorize under a liberal umbrella “religion”, and a political organization associated with Islam that aims to consolidate power operating through organs of the modern nation-state and its legal branches. This assessment, I should add, runs the risk of perpetuating the tendency of dichotomizing religion and secularity that I alluded to in the introduction. My point, put simply, is that the growing valence of religion as it is propagated by
mainstream U.S. media is due to the primordial coimbrication between “secular” and “religious” political imaginaries.

Such successive temporalization of the religious and the secular is discernible also in Bruce Robbins’ essay in the same issue. Postsecular societies, Robbins states as he borrows from Habermas’ definition of that term, were Christian communities that were secularized at some point and yet now which, consequent to the immigration of people of varying creeds, must adapt to different religious belief around them.13 Circumscribing the possibility of this portion of the secularization thesis—namely, that progressions in scientific explanations of natural phenomena would gradually undercut belief in supernatural influence on worldly occurrences—to Europe, Robbins claims that the U.S. on the other hand has never even been secular: “A large percentage of Americans believe their lives are subject to intervention by God or by the designs of guardian angels, saints, Satan, ghosts, witches…”14 Thus for Robbins the existence of religious belief in the U.S. is tantamount to its lack of secularity. One wonders if secularity in this case is a misnomer for atheism. At any rate, more remarkable is Robbins’ geographical ascription to Europe the success of secularization, on grounds of his perceived absence (or decline) of religious belief in that continent. Put otherwise, postsecularity is viable only in Europe precisely because Europe is posited as the site where secularization is claimed to have taken place to completion. It is therefore implied that the peripheries (the Third and the non-Western World), exhibiting religious foment in debates orbiting legislation and political action, are incapable of arriving at this telos.

The quotidian reality of secularity is, however, much more complex than this exclusive temporalization may suggest. Recent scholarship has convincingly shown that doctrinal secularism seeks to arrogate to the State the right to decide on proper forms of religious belief, practice and ritual, not, as is implied in the foregoing accounts, religion’s wholesale disappearance. This discretion that the State is endowed with is inextricably linked to its tendentiousness that belies liberal political philosophy’s putative neutrality regarding religious difference within its territories. Indeed, as Saba Mahmood has argued recently, it is the State’s prerogative to draw and re-draw the line between what constitutes a public and private (religious) matter that yields a circularity, often abetting the very strife it intends to address:

One of the greatest paradoxes of political secularism is that by making the state the arbiter of religious equality...[it] reduces religious equality to the politics of rights and recognition, strengthening the prerogative of the state to intervene in and reorder religious life—which...results in the exacerbation of religious polarization and inequality.15

In contradistinction to the exclusivity of the religious and the secular that marks Mufti’s and Robbins’ adumbrations, the secular doctrine in fact rests on an intertwined relationship, the former often subordinating the latter in exercising discretion over its form, jurisdiction and visibility. This is well taken. But how can we conceive of the secular in onto-epistemological terms rather than doctrinal ones? What do quotidian navigations of this entwined relationship between secularity and religion look like? How might the profound diversity of ways in which Islam, the State, the Nation are imagined and engaged by ordinary subjects complicate our presumptions about what secularity and religiosity are?

What we might term the secular tradition is, in its contemporary form, bound inextricably to the nexus of the State, the Nation and religion. The hub that is the nation-state, despite

transnational attempts to circumvent its oppressiveness, nevertheless remains to be the main artery through which secular power flows in current day. In what follows, I venture to engage with this tradition obliquely through the lens of a concept central to what I take to be the interface of those nodal points: *treason*. Some critics have expressed bemusement at the extraordinary revulsion that charges of treason against the State elicits. What is it about treason, they have wondered, which distinguishes it from other legal transgressions that are also met with punitive methods, but nevertheless with significantly less emotion. Yet, it seems to me that the abstractive sovereignty of the nation-state—juxtaposed to the singular sovereignty of a ruler-sovereign, where the latter’s physicality substantiates an empirical locus for his subjects—in fact isn’t as elusive as we might think. This is due to the State’s ability to coopt the nation and mobilize its populations not only using methods of physical enforcement, but also by employing techniques of affective manipulation and rhetorical maneuvering. But before I turn to the gravitation of the State and the Nation toward one another as entities (what I term the hyphenation of the nation-state), a final point about tradition is in order.

In a 1996 interview with Saba Mahmood, Asad expounds on his conceptualization of tradition in the following way.

When one talks about tradition, one should be talking about, in a sense, a dimension of social life and not a stage of social development. In an important sense, tradition and modernity are not really two mutually exclusive states of a culture or society but different aspects of historicity. Many of the things that are thought of as modern belong to traditions which have their roots in Western history. A changing tradition is often developing rapidly but a tradition nevertheless. When people talk about liberalism as a tradition, they recognize that it is a tradition in which there are possibilities of argument, reformulation, and encounter with other traditions, that there is a possibility of addressing contemporary problems through the liberal tradition. So one thinks of liberalism as a tradition central to modernity. How is it that one has something that is a tradition but that is also central to modernity? Clearly, liberalism is not a mixture of the traditional and the modern. It is a
tradition that defines one central aspect of Western modernity. It is no less modern by virtue of being a tradition than anything else is modern. And yet this is not the way in which most social scientists have talked about so-called "traditional" societies/cultures in the non-European world generally, and in the Islamic world in particular. So this is partly what I mean when I say that we must rethink the concept of tradition. In this sense, I think, we can regard the contemporary Islamic revival as consisting of attempts at articulating Islamic traditions that are adequate to the modern condition as experienced in the Muslim world, but also as attempts at formulating encounters with Western as well as Islamic history.\(^{16}\)

In striking contrast to the temporalized schematization of religion, secularity and post-secularity that typifies Mufti’s and Robbins’ accounts, Asad wants to think of tradition as inhering metamorphic capabilities that encompass not only merely debate and disagreements, but perhaps more significantly, the potentiality to adapt to the conditions and concepts of its time. Thus, it is this quality of responsiveness and acclimation that play a major role in the coinbrication between the State, the Nation and Islam (as evidenced in the secular tradition) in what follows. Perhaps no other example could delineate the tripartite entanglement I refer to in a more apt way than the video of an oath ceremony of Turkish female police officers that surfaced less than a year after the coup attempt of July 15\(^{th}\), 2016. In the minute-long video, the officers taking oath, standing in military stance, repeat after a male prompter in high volume an oath to revenge the coup-participators:

“In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful
Who makes things happen just by saying “Be”
Who fills hearts with faith…
To the Qur’an
To the prophets
To the flag
We make a vow!
May our martyrs rest in peace
and our veterans remain assured!
Revenge, revenge!
May revenge be everlasting!”

May our blood dry up if we forget!
May Allah protect the Turks! Amen!”

Exhibiting rhetoric expectable to be emanating from a right-wing propaganda rally, this State-sanctioned oath speech lays bare how the State puts on a majoritarian nationalist garb while also coopting religious speech, figures and edicts into its own techniques of disciplining loyal subjects. It is with the intention of parsing this enmeshment between the triumvirate nation-state-history that I now turn to a series of lectures delivered by Michel Foucault at College De France in 1975.

The Hyphenation of the Nation-State

In a lengthy discussion of Boulainvilliers’ historiography in Society Must Be Defended, Michel Foucault credits the French historian with capsizing preexisting understandings of the relationship between subjects and those who govern. By decentering the locus of analysis of that relationship away from the juridical terms of sovereignty, Boulainvilliers, Foucault contends, “describes the phenomenon of power not in juridical terms of sovereignty but in historical terms of domination—and the play of relations of force.” He does this by usurping the state sanctioned discourse—hitherto serving strictly the latter’s “managerial rationality”. Thus Boulainvilliers’ move in establishing an interlinked historico-political continuum, amongst other implications, marks the transition from “a history that established right by telling the story of wars to a history that continues the war by deciphering the war and the struggle that are going on within all the institutions of right and peace.”

19 Ibid, 171.
It’s worthy to note that Foucault’s attraction to Boulainvilliers’ gesture of deciphering the war and the struggle that perennially undergirds all institutions of the nation perhaps arises from his own project of excavating “subjugated knowledges.” Indeed, in the introductory remarks, a striking similarity between the two projects is patent: Foucault describes subjugated knowledges as “blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using…the tools of scholarship.” Therefore the process of unearthing “inferior” discourses highlights for Foucault a struggle that aims to reveal power relations undergirding the nation-state.

Boulainvillers sought to reinstitute the nobility as a force in the social field by employing historical discourse as a means to challenge what previously had been a monopoly of monarchical discourse about itself and its wars. A struggle between myriad knowledges (Foucault provides examples of the proliferation and dispersal of technological knowledges in the 18th century) and a normalizing State discourse would emerge in the eighteenth century—coinciding with the genesis of the nation-State. Schematically, then, his postulations trace a threefold transformation in the discourse of history: in the 17th century, the discourse continued under the influence of the State, which comprised of the latter recounting its own past, as well as a zeal to buttress (if not to enhance) the omnipresence of its powers. The nobility’s fierce onslaught against this uniform discourse would ensue subsequently—marking the excavation of what we may very well term, “subjugated histories” (harkening back to Foucault’s genealogical investigations into subjugated knowledges.) Their discourse, Foucault asserts, attempted to dismantle the unity of the State to illuminate the existence of cleaved forces with their particular histories, pasts, and unique relations of domination.

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20 Ibid, 7.
21 Ibid, 224.
Contemporary historical discourse follows a vector akin to its statist antecedent, and yet significant divergences abound between the two characteristically similar discourses. In contradistinction to the previous statist elements in the historical discourse of the 17th century, Foucault asserts that, starting from the 20th century and persisting thereafter, the incipient discourse’s objective has been “to write the history of the relations that are forever being woven between nation and State, between the nation’s Statist potential and the actual totality of the State.” 22 In addition to this intertwinement between nation and the state (which will prove indispensable to my ruminations on the current political situation in Turkey), the struggle between different “nations” within a uniform society—physical in essence as delineated by Foucault’s account of Boulainvillers—is morphed into one substantiated by a rivalry for the universality of the state. 23 This civil — as termed by Foucault himself—struggle has replaced and in some ways been superimposed on the “warlike, military, and bloody basis discovered by the historians of the eighteen century.” 24 Consequently, irruptions of physical violence, or wars, would not signify anything but spasmodic, exceptional episodes of disquiet. In other words, the norm would persist to be enveloped in civil struggles within the realm of the State.

This remarkable depiction of the vicissitudes of historical discourse between the 17th and 19th centuries is laden with implications on sovereignty and disparate ways of conceiving the nation—and hence those that belong to it on the one hand, and those that are excluded from it on the other. It is certain that Foucault engages with this set of motifs, which bare manifold social, political and cultural implications, in order to elucidate varying questions arising from divergent vantages. These particular lectures (amassed under the title Society Must Be Defended) signal to

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22 Ibid, 224-5.
23 Ibid, 225.
24 Ibid, 226.
Foucault’s interest in biopolitics and governing *populations* rather than individual bodies—to which he would devote more time in subsequent years in his lectures at that same institution. Nevertheless, his analysis bares significant insights into the constitutive logics of *the* nation, as well as the operatives (mechanisms, techniques and technologies) of power in contemporary nation-states. Thus to elaborate further on this entanglement between the State and the nation, I now turn to the post-coup maneuvers of the Turkish State in jailing significant portions of the population in suspicion of their participation (or collusion) in the coup attempt of July 2016.

Prior to the declaration of the state of emergency, the Office of the President released a statement that chronicled the events of the evening of July 15th, as well as the implications of the heroic acts displayed by the Turkish people that evening on securing the institution of democracy. In a chain e-mail circulated to expats and members of Turkish diaspora, Erdogan explicitly asserted that the coup attempt ought to be considered treason against the homeland (*vatan*).\(^{25}\) Civil unrest is hardly foreign to followers of Turkish domestic politics, as in recent years, the primordial state-sanctioned racism against Kurds has been coupled with a growing sentiment of xenophobia that has arisen as a reaction to Turkey’s admission of refugees fleeing the war in Syria. As the participants and goals of myriad protests have varied, so have the Turkish State’s responses. While the president’s statement championed those who took to the streets and defended the nation from “terrorists and traitors” in the wake of the coup attempt, the state’s vehement denouncement of the penultimate civil mutiny, namely, the Gezi Park protests of 2013, still reverberates lucidly in the nation’s memory. The telling juxtaposition of state descriptions of Gezi participants, clad in dismissive State rhetoric, and the lionizing state discourse that has narrated the heroic acts of the

defiance demonstrated by ordinary citizens on July 15th, I want to suggest, is underlain with a particular discursive power that’s capable of ostracizing parts of the nation as it is equally adept at establishing and re-affirming its constitutive makeup. My point isn’t that the two events are equitable; doubtlessly they lack even the remotest correlative. Yet I find the contrast in state narratives a suggestive point of departure to explore the subject-producing matrix of the nation-state, granting legitimacy to certain groups as it renders portions of the resident populations on the margins of, or worse, as decoupled from, the nation.

The overwhelming majority of analyses of the failed coup (both academic and mainstream) are marked by a blinkered approach that supinely finds treasonous anyone with ties to Gülen or his organization. Yet Gülen’s “loyalists” do not constitute an illegal organization inasmuch as they remain a private practice—the appropriate domain in liberal/secular democracies to which religious belief belongs. The ongoing purge, however, is characterized by a suspicion that enables the persecution of all persons with evidence linking them to Gülen’s circles, irrespective of their involvement (or lack thereof) in the coup attempt. In this way, the mythos of suspicion that surrounds the current witch-hunt ineluctably renders indictable even those affiliates who may have not partaken in the putsch—exemplary of instances in which suspicion creates the signs. A corollary of this is evidenced in the arrest of all suspected affiliates of this particular Islamic mystical sect on grounds of belonging to a terrorist organization.

Integral to the current purge amongst a plethora of governmental sectors, then, is the question of who belongs to the nation and who is enveloped in charges of treachery; but equally significant is the legitimizing logic that renders them precisely so. In light of this and in tandem, I ask: how do we conceive of power’s interpellative function in instilling in subjects a loyalty to the nation-state?
In the midst of the ongoing purge that has resulted in upwards of 40,000 lost jobs and approximately 115,000 people detained on charges of treasonous activities, Kadir Topbaş, the current mayor of Istanbul, announced the inauguration of a cemetery reserved solely for those declared ‘traitors’ who have allegedly partaken in the failed-coup attempt. Marking a worrisome development in the proliferation of stern and hasty government action in the aftermath of the coup attempt, the cemetery’s announcement was approved by Erdogan’s constituency—most of whom were also present in the numerous State-sponsored street demonstrations that heralded the peoples’ hard-fought battle to conserve their democracy on the night of July 15th. Of course, the government’s usurpations have been met with strong opposition around the world—ranging from statements of decrimal by ‘Academics for Peace’ in Turkey to trenchant newspaper editorials objurgating the administration for its post-failed-coup realpolitik maneuvers. Yet elided in most accounts is the discreet shift in state rhetoric which has labeled all members of Gülen’s organization as not only traitors, but also terrorists (all adherents of Gülen’s mystical Islamic sect have thus been deemed members of a terrorist organization). In tandem with state-sponsored mediums, a cursory scan of most oppositional media outlets evinces in the adoption of identical

Note the overwhelming sense of disbelief that the editors of a major US news publication express on the possibility of covert American involvement in a coup attempt—examples of which exist in plenitude in US history. I don’t want to be taken as meaning to “blame” the U.S. for the coup attempt, or as supporting the AKP administration. My point simply is the irony in statements that aim to absolve the U.S. from a possible role in the coup attempt when the State Department’s records indicate U.S. intelligence of, if not involvement in, most 20th & 21st century coups around the world.
28 To my knowledge, the only exception is Turkish intellectual and academic Ahmet İnsel’s brilliant analysis in which he asserts that ultimately, which persons or groups, and why they come to be identified as terrorists is contingent on an asymmetrical power dynamic. He substantiates this argument by juxtaposing the failed coup attempt in Turkey with the successful coup in Egypt led by Sisi; the only difference is, İnsel argues, the “terrorists” have lost in Turkey while they have prevailed in Egypt (and thus have labeled the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization). For İnsel’s piece see, İnsel, Ahmet (2016, August 16th). “Is Non-Terrorist Organized Crime Conceivable?”. Cumhuriyet. Retrieved from: http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/585109/Terorden_baska_orgutlu_suc_olamaz_mi_.html (translations my own, accessed September, 2016).
terminology with that of state-sanctioned rhetoric. As a result, irrespective of tangible evidence linking them to involvement in the coup-attempt, arrest warrants for all individuals linked to the organization have been commissioned.

This certainly harks back to Foucault’s notion of state-racism, which postulates that racism in modern states functions precisely to enable and to qualify individuals for the state to kill with impunity (perhaps it should not come as a surprise that a question revolving around the 2017 referendum has been the reinstitution of the death-penalty). Dovetailing this narrative, the foregoing purge against a religious sect can be conceived as the contemporary exemplar of this kind of state-racism, in which a certain set of signs amongst persons are produced and rendered as threatening the sovereignty of the nation state. Thus the designated group not only begins to be conceived of as constituting a group akin to ‘enemy of the state,’ and thus treacherous, but are also decoupled from the nation (while coincidentally labeled as terrorists) and exposed to, as Foucault would hold, “political death, expulsion and rejection” from that entity. Those suspected to be Gülen’s loyalists are but the latest addition to the list of marginalized populations of Turkey that have been subjected to “higher risk[s] of death” by the Turkish state, including Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, leftists, labor movements, amongst others. More significant, however, has been their de facto expulsion from the Turkish nation.

So far I’ve suggested that the gravitation of the state and the nation toward one another, as delineated by Michel Foucault, may help explain the emotive charge surrounding the specter of the traitor. This double movement, I’ve argued, in contrast to the elusive nature of the loyalty of subjects to a faceless, abstract entity such as the State, is rendered all the more tangible by yet another expulsion that charges of treason result in: ostracization from the nation. Thus the putschists, in their zeal to overthrow the governors of the State, do not merely transgress an implicit
code of fidelity to the State, but perhaps more significantly are accused of betraying their homeland (vatan). The extreme example of the State’s impotence and fragility as witnessed on the eve of July 15th, 2016, has been usurped as justification for the implementation of an indefinite State of Emergency. Thus one way of interpreting the extraordinary and expedient security measures undertaken by the Turkish State, in its detainment of suspected political adversaries thought to be in cahoots with the puschists, may be that the State is simply responding to an attempt on its destruction. Yet the perennial anxiety of the imminence of conspirators from within, and correlative methods to identify and persecute them, which abound in history, should push us to think otherwise. This, I reckon, isn’t unique to the secular tradition, as a similar paranoia regarding infidelity and the existence of potential traitors is discernible in myriad traditions—in particular shooting through relationships that envelop authority and subjectivity.

**On Government and Truth**

The interminable tension between expanding individual liberties and ensuring security in liberal democracies—put somewhat reductively as “liberty vs. security” by George Packer in his review of Citizen4— is an ongoing one. The NSA’s overbearing and illegitimate, en masse surveillance of, and data collection on, American citizens as well as foreign governments and nationals is the latest manifestation of this preoccupation. Ironically, the exposure of the U.S. government’s different methods of apprehending bearers of secrets, or uncovering the bearer of secrets within its territories, seems to be the biggest secret of all. This anxiety, of course, was manifest in the charges of treason that were brought against the whistleblower Edward Snowden, who successfully leaked

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a trove of files—largest to date—of the different methods undertaken by the U.S. government in its multi-pronged data collection, wire-tapping and other methods of surveilling its citizenry.

Thus this quest for the truth, at times extracted under physical duress, and increasingly through techniques of psychological manipulation, remains to be a crucial method of discipline employed by the security State. Yet, my understanding of this technique’s employment by the government isn’t in the same sense as some defenders of the State’s interceptionist prerogative would have it: that as long as the State is responsible for ensuring the well-being of self and subjects, collection of communications is necessary for the benevolence of all. I suggest rather that the systematic and authoritative methods to extract the truth from bodies, and the corresponding demands from subjects to produce truths—a crucial motif of secular power—is productive in that it engenders a subjectivity that requires the perpetual production and manifestation of truth. In other words, secular power’s entwinement with truth extraction isn’t operative in its denegative, security qualities—e.g., interception of data, preemptively discovering internal threats to the population, etc.—but functional in producing docile subjectivities loyal to the nation-state, and just as importantly, subjects who produce self-truths. Thus, in what follows, I’d like to think through the relationship between truth acts and governmentality.

In his intrepid investigative work, journalist Glenn Greenwald summarily describes the objective of the U.S. surveillance state in the following way: “to collect, store, monitor, and analyze all electronic communication by all people around the globe. [The NSA] is devoted to one overarching mission: to prevent the slightest piece of electronic communication from evading its systemic grasp.”30 The collect-it-all philosophy of the agency emerged in the midst of the United States’ invasion of Iraq 2005, when Keith Alexander, a 4-star general, was appointed as the head

of the National Security Agency by secretary of state Donald Rumsfeld.\textsuperscript{31} Greenwald traces the current scope of the agency’s collection to Alexander’s growing dismay at the limited focus of U.S. intelligence on only suspected Iraqi insurgents. Shortly after taking office, Alexander would expand the breadth of the agency’s collection to include the entire Iraqi population—and shortly thereafter apply “this system of ubiquitous surveillance—originally created for a foreign population in an active warzone—to American citizens.”\textsuperscript{32}

When confronted by Senate Intelligence Committee member Ron Wyden in the wake of the Snowden revelations on surveillance program PRISM, an NSA surveillance program that has collected internet communications on citizens from at least 9 U.S. Internet companies, the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, famously stated that the agency does not collect any form of data on American citizens, if not unwittingly. Along with remarks made by President Obama to Charlie Rose in the wake of those revelations, this prevailing account would suggest that the interceptions and data collection on U.S. citizens were incidental, if not inadvertent. Yet, in a conversation between Greenwald and then deputy legal director of the ACLU, Jameel Jaffer, the latter finds this posturing deceitful: “The principal purpose of the [2008 amendment of the FISA act of 1978] was to make it possible for the government to collect Americans’ international communications—and to collect those communications without reference to whether any party to those communications was doing anything illegal.”\textsuperscript{33}

But the U.S. government’s surveillance of its own citizens shouldn’t be taken as a unique case of the deployment of such technological efforts. Indeed, as Greenwald reports, the disclosure of the British Government Communications Headquarters’ (GCHQ) proactive efforts to “collect

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 95.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 96.
\textsuperscript{33} Jameel Jaffer, e-mail message to Glenn Greenwald, \textit{quoted in} Ibid, 127.
it all” as constitutive of its interception of satellite communications, titled TARMAC, proves the ubiquity of such anxieties as a post 9/11 preoccupation of most Western nation-states.\textsuperscript{34} Doubtlessly, the foregoing techniques of acquiring secrets by \textit{en masse} data collection of individuals demonstrate a modern phenomenon. Yet does modernity necessarily demarcate the epochal genesis of the coimbrication of truth and government? In other words, is the constitutive relationship between truth and government a modern phenomenon?

In a later set of lectures than the foregoing (SMD), Michel Foucault elaborates further on the biopolitical state which he had adumbrated in the latter lectures. Focusing on \textit{government of men} as leitmotif—and its operational functions in the nation state—Foucault’s exegesis deals heavily with Christian pastoral power. Underscoring the absence of motifs that take as foci the shepherd/sheep mode of governing in ancient Greece, he traces this \textit{sui generis} mode of power that’s evidentiary in the nation state to the Church. The institutionalization of a power that “lays claim to the daily government of men in their real life on the grounds of their salvation and on the scale of humanity,” remarks Foucault, over the course of fifteen centuries and until the eighteenth, an apparatus of power was formed. And this form of “pastoral power, absolutely bound up with the organization of a religion as a Church, with the Christian religion as the Christian Church, no doubt underwent considerable transformations during these fifteen centuries of its history. It was no doubt shifted, broken up, transformed, and integrated in various forms, but it has never been truly abolished.”\textsuperscript{35}

I quote this profound passage not to support the banal argument that the secular State may in fact be religious in essence, but rather for its implications regarding a technology of government

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 97.
that bears a continuity with a pre-nation-state epoch; for as Foucault asserts, the pastorate gives “rise to an art of conducting, directing, leading, guiding, taking in hand and manipulating men, an art of monitoring them and urging them step by step, an art with the function of taking charge of men collectively and individually…”36 Yet equally remarkable is the coeval valence bestowed on truth in this epoch. For achieving salvation in the pastorate is contingent on belief and the professing of particular truths.37

In his seminal essay, “Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual”, Talal Asad expounds on the shift from trial by ordeal to judicial torture in the Middle Ages in Christian ritual. This transmutation of criminal law and its modes of reaching decisions from an accusatorial to inquisitorial procedure marks, according to Asad, the abolishment of methods undergirded by myth to ones that would be perceived as “rational”. A sprawling interest in humanly—instead of divine—proof would provide numerous implications. And Asad is quite acute to point out that the inquisitorial method of torture, “directed at securing the truth with the help of human agents only, its systematic use in the Middle Ages can be construed as a progressive step in the rational development of European law.”38 Moreover, there’s much to be said about its manifold and profound implications on the liberal tradition—e.g., motifs of rationality, etc.—and its productive qualities in regards to subjecthood.

Yet what interests me aren’t such implications nor the continuity of methods of torture that persist today—both points, admittedly, are important in their own right and possess queries that demand further exploration. Instead, what I find remarkable about Foucault’s and Asad’s accounts is the shared sentiment of the occurrence of a series of fundamental shifts in Christian punitive

36 Ibid, 165. (italics mine).
37 Ibid, 167.
38 Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion, Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 86.
logics in the Medieval Ages. That Asad and Foucault engage with divergent praxes in this period—whereas the former’s interests lay in the metamorphosis in the meanings of pain and truth in the aforementioned shift from accusatorial to inquisitorial methods, Foucault’s chapters elaborate on the pastor’s responsibility for both individual and collective, and this responsibility’s causal links with redemption—is a point well taken. But both accounts do demonstrate, I think, however briefly, the emergent preponderance of administrative concerns with 1) a belief in individual possession of hidden secrets and 2) the extraction of such secrets from individuals.

Asad explains this shift as one that also marked a change in the way judgment was reached. In fact, for the accusatorial method, there was nothing to judge; the result (of a duel, or challenge) was indeed “judgment itself.” But the advent of an inquisitorial methodology ushered in the inclusion of a third, neutral party: the judge. Thus quoting Foucault in his perspicacious reading, Asad agrees with the latter in that the investigation (a trademark of the inquisitorial method) “as an authoritarian search for a truth…was the sovereign power arrogating to itself the right to establish the truth by a number of regulated techniques.”39 Such regulated techniques, in the authority’s quest for confessions, would take “verbal discourse as the medium of truth. Secret thoughts had to be made available in the form of utterances—words as inner signs brought out as meaningful sounds.”40

Yet the necessity for exogenous methods to extract these presupposed hidden truths may have less valence in our contemporary condition. While it may still be the case that populations cannot be directed “without carrying out operations in the domain of truth,”41 the very process of the production of those truths have been assumed by subjects who create and narrate their own

39 Ibid, 89.
40 Ibid, 93.
truths. What may have once been a forcibly produced truth, resultant of a physical, repressive extraction akin to techniques employed by inquisitorial interrogations, are perhaps superseded by a normalized discourse comprised of self-produced truths, one that requires “the obligation to speak, the obligation to tell, the obligation to tell the truth,” and “to produce a true discourse on oneself, and to do so indefinitely.”

It is perhaps the very obfuscation, deception and elision of these truths by the traitor that is precisely the reason it is the perennial anathema to authority. The traitor, under garbs, is the enemy deceptively perceived as friend. It is the very blurring of that primordial dichotomy which “makes undecidable brother and enemy,” a confusion that informs the security state’s paranoia regarding conspirators within. The traitor, whose truth is unknown, is the deliverer of certain secret truths to the enemy. The traitor, lastly, elides docility (thereby authority) by obscuring his truth, for “putting his own truth into discourse is not just an essential obligation; it is one of the basic forms of our obedience.”

**Epilogue: On Treason and Tradition**

Let me conclude with a few remarks on the relationship between treason and tradition. In an essay written following the 2013 coup d’état in Egypt, Talal Asad engages in a reading of Hannah Arendt’s writings on revolution and tradition. In a compendious and wide-ranging essay, Asad argues that a crucial point in Arendt’s concept of revolution is that despite the detachment of religious authority from political tradition (therefore this authority’s secularization), a tradition of

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42 Ibid, 311.
43 Agamben urges us to think about civil war as the paradigm we inhabit in our post 9/11 world. It is a world in which classic dichotomies such as family/foe, private/public, family/politics become undistinguishable. Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 14.
founding has remained regnant in European politics. “A rupture from the past and an opening to the future,” this founding of a political tradition, Asad maintains, is marked by the necessity of violence. Yet what’s new in the practice of revolution isn’t the use of violence but rather “its role in constituting a new legitimate order for the good of the people’s future.” But Asad deftly alerts us the shared kin of political violence between revolution and coup d’état, with the crucial difference between the two being the latter’s aim to replace the seat-holders rather than the system itself. More significant, however, is his next point: coup d’états, much like revolutions, adopt a narrative of legitimate necessity to saving the nation and securing its posterity. Thus the distinguishing tension between revolutions and coups can be conceived as a vision of beginning anew by founding a new tradition on the one hand, and an action to conserve a living one on the other. How does the role of the traitor figure on this temporal axis of acts that envision beginning anew by looking ahead, and those acts undertaken with the goal of conserving a tradition that’s rooted in the past, alive and still evolving? Can we conceive of treason as a creative act, one that might enable us to envisage a post-nation-state order of things and epoch?

It is perhaps indisputable that the most infamous traitor in Western history is Judas Iscariot. For many centuries, that figure has been reviled as the incarnation of evil, and it doubtlessly remains to be so in the eyes of many Christians the world over. In a chapter of their 2007 book, Reading Judas, Elaine Pagels and Karen King ask what seems to me a question of crucial relevancy to the potentialities of betrayal (a cognate of treason): “Judas: Betrayer or Favored Disciple?” Through an exegesis on multiple gospels, the authors Pagels and King suggest an account that

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46 Ibid, 183.
differs profoundly with the all too common narrative that has demonized Judas Iscariot as “motivated by greed and inspired by Satan.”48 “All the New Testament gospel writers,” they aver, “agree that Jesus anticipated, even embraced, his own death.”49 The consensus Pagels and King seem to be point to is the necessity of the act of betrayal of Judas as part of God’s divine plan. Put differently, the advent of the Christian tradition would be impossible without Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, and that this is precisely what the New Testament Gospels seem to be implying.

We would be wrong, of course, to employ a homogenizing discourse of treason that attempts to reach axioms about its constitution, its objectives and so forth; for treason connotes a panoply of acts, intentions and aspirations. Yet invariably, treason—much like the noun ‘terrorist’—is an objectively sanctioned label, authoritative descriptions of a diversity of intentions that effectuate the way ‘treasonous’ subjects to act the way they do. It is therefore plausible that certain types of treasonous acts are informed by a conservative disposition that aims to retrieve a past tenet, reacting to a perceived digression from that founding inscription. The most recent example of this, perhaps, is the case of Edward J. Snowden and the NSA revelations. In Laura Poitras’ Citizen 4, a documentary film chronicling the 8-day period in which 2 journalists, 1 filmmaker and a whistleblower meet in Hong Kong to disclose a trove of files that document illegitimate government overreach in collecting data on citizens, Snowden asserts that the primary reason he has chosen to have Greenwald and Poitras gradually disseminate the massive amounts of documents rather than do so himself is precisely to circumvent the grave dangers the files may pose to the national security interests of the United States. More significantly, however, in an act of utmost patriotism, he has chosen to divulge the secret NSA documents ultimately because they

48 Ibid, 3.
49 Ibid, 3.
constitute a major transgression of a founding statute of the Constitution, of which the American people ought to be made aware.

Thus it seems to me that the matrixial grid of the nation-state is for the moment unescapable. The concept of treason, along with its cognates (connoting profane transgressions of trust) are just as central to the nation-state as to (both previous and regnant) religious codes of ethics. Certain affective reflexes that are ushered by treason, I think, warrant an interrogation of the constitutive and operative logics of the nation-state. Thinking about power is merely one vantage point amongst a panoply of angles from which this inquiry can be initiated. The salience of studies that take secularism as object qua political doctrine is offset by a dearth of explorations into the secular as onto-epistemology, as a way of being in and seeing the world. In the Middle East in particular, secular identities aren’t devoid of religious belief, ritual or sensibility—much less conceptualized as antithetical to religion. Instead, for many subjects, their secular identity is navigated in quotidian re-negotiations between what it means to be Muslim and secular in simultaneity, as the two are rarely perceived as exclusive of one another. What we should increasingly gesture toward, then, is a genealogy of the secular in onto-epistemological terms to illuminate some of the ideas as well as concepts that have contributed to its genesis, and the forms of life it draws on and allows to be lived. Treason, I believe, may offer us one such path.
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