Unfree Agents: Emancipation and Domination after Postcolonial Theory

Once upon a time, the political Left had a distinctive theory about how progress towards universal emancipation was achieved. The theory was that some people were so positioned, socially, that they had – or were in the process of developing – both the motive and the power to liberate not only themselves, but all of humanity, from the shackles of domination, oppression, and exploitation.

The people in this position were members of the growing class of wage-laborers. They had the motive to band together and fight for universal emancipation because they were dependent for their lives and livelihoods upon the large-scale industrial production that capitalism had created. The repertoire of individual skills necessary for artisanal and peasant production, as well as the taste for small-scale, provincial life, were lost to them. They were children of the modern age, dependent upon the produce of the whole globe, and, hence, tied to the fates of people everywhere. Local independence – the sort of emancipation once offered by the free cities of feudal Europe – was impossible for them. Only global emancipation would work.

They had the power to pursue this aim because their position in the modern economy brought them into close contact with one another, and compelled them to band together to bargain collectively with their bosses and to agitate politically for legal limits to their exploitation. They had crucial civil liberties that slaves and serfs had lacked. They could read and write, meet together, educate one another, form political parties, and travel from place to place.

This theory – that universal emancipation would proceed from the self-emancipation of the working class – was most explicitly and authoritatively set forth by Marx, but this does not mean that it originated with him alone or was articulated only by Marxists.[[1]](#endnote-1) It combined Lord Byron’s exhortation to the “hereditary bondsman,” that “who would be free themselves must strike the blow,”[[2]](#endnote-2) with the knowledge that universal liberation could only be a collective endeavor, and hence required the conditions for organization and collective action. Its wide adoption gave rise to a more or less coherent political strategy that profoundly reshaped the world between the end of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century. While the theory was seldom elaborated or analyzed as such, it came to be expressed in shorthand as the dictum that the proletariat is the historical agency of emancipation.

The many successes and many failures of the Marxist political strategy led to the progressive extension of this dictum, but also to the gradual evacuation of its theoretical content. From the rudimentary theory descended the simple conviction that the oppressed are the agents of emancipation. As Marxism’s revolutionary horizon receded, historians and sociologists were content to attribute resistance to the agency of the oppressed, emancipation seeming too strenuous an expectation. Finally, what began as a political theory of universal emancipation became the injunction, voiced in seminar rooms and referee reports, to pay attention to the agency of the oppressed. We are content, finally, to emphasize that the oppressed are actually doing something, anything. They are not passive victims. See, they make choices! They live lives! They create meaning! Behold! Agency!

Obviously, I am unsatisfied with this result. It seems to me that the original Left theory was an honest attempt to respond to a real need. If you desire that freedom be universally enjoyed, but do not trust existing elites to magnanimously liberate people everywhere, and do not think that liberation will be the spontaneous outcome of global competition, then you need a theory, upon the basis of which you might begin to construct political strategies.

The absence of such a theory has had especially acute effects since 11 September 2001. Faced with an aggressive military project of invasion, occupation, and regime change, a project which attempted to justify itself in part by casting itself as a liberation of the people – and especially the women – of the invaded nations from oppression, the Euro-American Left was caught on the horns of a dilemma. The discourse of emancipation seemed to be thoroughly caught up in what Lila Abu-Lughod called a “rhetoric of salvation,”[[3]](#endnote-3) and with the military strategy emanating from Pennsylvania Avenue and Downing Street. Some on the Left embraced the rhetoric of salvation and went along, however reluctantly, with the call for war. Others, horrified at the neo-imperialism and the march to war, questioned not only the rhetoric of salvation, but “the idea of liberation” itself, asking, with Abu-Lughod, whether it can “capture the goals for which all women strive.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

The idea of liberation can and should be rescued from its implication in the rhetoric of salvation. The fear – both understandable and historically justified – that the emancipatory project is implicitly imperialist can be put to rest by careful analysis. In order to show this, I will examine Saba Mahmood’s book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Mahmood’s is perhaps the richest and most influential articulation of the post-2001 skepticism about the normative role emancipation plays in critical and feminist theory. Mahmood is trying to find a way out of the tradition of liberation theory. By working backwards, I hope to uncover which impasses have motivated Mahmood to attempt her self-extrication, in the hope that some of those might be loosened or straightened out to the point where the motivation to abandon the idea of liberation disappears.

I read Mahmood’s work as an immanent critique of postcolonial and feminist theories, especially as these traditions of study have come together in postcolonial and poststructuralist feminist thought. Postcolonial studies began from the imperative to study ‘history from below,’ the rejection both of Leninist vanguardism regarding the development of the productive forces and of idealist fantasies about the diffusion of modernity and freedom.[[5]](#endnote-5) Feminist studies, too, went through this moment of expecting change to come from below, from the subordinated and dominated, who were not inert victims, but forever resisting their oppression, and forever negotiating the terms of their subordination.

Tracing the thread of Mahmood’s problematic back behind 9/11 and through these traditions, I will argue, shows us the theoretical stakes of her attempt “to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.”[[6]](#endnote-6) My hypothesis is that a strong distinction between agency and freedom can resolve the problems that motivate Mahmood’s arguments, but without compelling us to abandon liberation as the polestar of political theoretical analysis.

My argument will proceed in four stages. First, I will identify what I take to be Mahmood’s central theoretical achievement. Against the New Left identification of subaltern agency with resistance to domination, Mahmood rightly insists that agency and desire are not automatically oriented towards liberation. Unfortunately, Mahmood mistakes the lesson of her intervention because she conflates desire and interest. Therefore, in stage two, I argue for a universal interest in freedom, and show that this interest validates freedom’s normative status for emancipatory political theory, including feminist theory. In stage three, however, I argue that the identification of universal human interests is insufficient to ground emancipatory politics (as opposed to emancipatory theory). Emancipatory politics must begin from people’s felt desires and self-understandings, not from their theoretically identified interests. Finally, I argue that domination and oppression can only be identified by a theoretical analysis of social relations and institutions, an analysis that stands at arm’s length from people’s self-understandings. Thus, I draw the general conclusion that emancipatory theory and emancipatory politics aim at the same goal, and are mutually informative, but necessarily pursue independent paths.

I.

*Politics of Piety* examines the women’s mosque movement in Cairo during the 1990s. The mosque movement saw large numbers of women undertaking formal study of the Quran in mosques, traditionally all-male spaces. From the first pages of her study, Mahmood criticizes what she characterizes as “the normative liberal assumptions about human nature” that underlie much scholarship on Islamic women, assumptions that figure “agency as consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Because of these assumptions, according to Mahmood, “women’s active support for socioreligious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses a dilemma for feminist analysts.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Here are women entering into formerly male spheres of society, but for the sake of reaffirming norms and virtues of male authority and female subordination. Although I will want to take issue with aspects of both Mahmood’s analysis of the problem and her own attempt to avoid the trap she identifies, her analysis is compelling when read, not simply as a response to the post-9/11 political conjuncture, but as an attempt to extricate theory from the confusions about freedom that marked the passage from ‘history from below’ through postcolonial theory. This section traces the beginning of this movement in order to pinpoint what is compelling about Mahmood’s argument.

‘History from below’ or ‘people’s history’ has a long and varied pedigree, but in the mid-twentieth century, it was inseparable from Marxist humanism and the New Left. Marxist humanism was itself diverse; my sketch here does not seek to do justice to every aspect, but only to identify some of the primary motivations of the movement and to discern its general drift, especially as this was integral to the development of postcolonial and feminist studies.

Marxist humanism is inexplicable except as a rejection of Stalinism. The vanguard party and the autonomous development of the productive forces are its antitheses. This can already be discerned in what might be considered the founding document of history from below, CLR James’s *The Black Jacobins*, which sets out to demonstrate historically what it also predicts for the future, that “from the people heaving in action will come the leaders.”[[9]](#endnote-9) In the retrospective characterization of CLR James’s long-time partner, Selma James, Marxist humanism had re-discovered “a Marx free of Stalinist influence.” Prior to this re-discovery, “the Marxist Left had ceased to base itself on working-class self-activity and had substituted the dependence on the vanguard party for the active, creative participation of all the exploited.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Against the crude version of historical materialism promulgated by the Third International, according to which historical forces compel individuals and classes to play their parts in a drama that has already been scripted out, and according to the direction of the Party, which alone has a copy of the script, the new Marxist humanism “focussed on the operations of human agency within structures of subordination.”[[11]](#endnote-11) The way out of reductive and deterministic historical materialism was, again and again, sought in the analysis of the culture and community of the oppressed. These constituted “an *autonomous* domain” of study,[[12]](#endnote-12) independent of the modern forms of capitalistic and colonial domination that were the primary evils against which the political commitments of the New Leftists took shape. The analysis of the culture and community of the oppressed required the analyst “to re-imagine the moral assumptions of another social configuration,”[[13]](#endnote-13) alien to the modern economic and political order.

The program of study established by this turn was demanding. Not only did it require of the historian or sociologist the imaginative feat of entering into a different social and ideological world, one in which what appears to us to be the epitome of rational action – maximizing average return on investment, for example – was not merely frowned upon but deeply irrational, even absurd.[[14]](#endnote-14) It also required the hard labour of differentiating between two discourses that were, in fact, always intermingled and co-present, and which James Scott termed the public and the hidden transcripts.[[15]](#endnote-15) E.P. Thompson noted that “one can often detect within the same individual alternating identities, one deferential, the other rebellious. This was a problem with which – using different terms – Gramsci concerned himself. He noted the contrast between the ‘popular morality’ of folklore tradition and ‘official morality.’”[[16]](#endnote-16) The conditions of domination require of the dominated that they accede in many instances to the official ideology of the dominators, such that any historian who is satisfied to ‘read straight’ public pronouncements, whether from the ruling class or from the ruled, is likely to be badly misled about the consciousness of the ruled. The most extreme articulation of this tendency was Gayatri Spivak’s argument that “the subaltern’s view, will, presence, […] cannot be recovered, ‘it will probably never be recovered.’”[[17]](#endnote-17)

Scholars in this vein argued that, although they did not rise up and overthrow their landlords in a revolution made according to Marxist prescriptions, the peasants of Southeast Asia were far from passive victims of landlords’ oppression. Rather, they were constantly engaged, very actively, in negotiating the terms of their subordination and exploitation, via sabotage, ruse, and stratagem.[[18]](#endnote-18) Likewise, many feminist scholars were occupied with criticizing other feminists for having attempted to constitute women “as a group via dependency relations vis-à-vis men, who are implicitly held responsible for these relations.” This theoretical construction of women had to be challenged, it was argued, because it made “shared dependency,” “victim status,” and “powerlessness” the basis of women – especially women of color – “as an apolitical group with no subject status.” If women are to be constituted as a group, by this argument, it could only be via “the common context of struggle against class, race, and imperialist hierarchies.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

These arguments – understandable enough as reactions to the way in which some Marxist and feminist work seemed to collude with ‘enlightened imperialism’ in portraying the great mass of humanity as passive and inert, incapable of acting in their own names, and hence in need of liberation from above and afar – generate an impasse, however, because they tacitly identify the agency of the oppressed with their resistance to oppression. The real mind of the peasant or woman, the beliefs that are really theirs, and the acts that really proceed from those beliefs, the authentic working class culture, and the autonomy of the subaltern: these are to be found, if at all, in the moments of rupture and resistance, the food riots and the foot-dragging alike.

This assumption is the object of Mahmood’s criticism. The New Left project of looking for agency only in acts of resistance or subversion “impose[s] a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power – a teleology that makes it hard to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Unquestioned by all of this work is “the universality of the desire […] to be free from relations of subordination, and, for women, from structures of male domination.”[[21]](#endnote-21) But the universality of this desire must be questioned; indeed, thinks Mahmood, it must be denied, for “the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire.” It is therefore necessary “to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

Mahmood is, essentially, rerunning the New Left argument against the New Left. Reacting to the supposedly Marxist claim that only the proletariat was an historical agent, and that their historical agency consisted in their revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, the New Left had asserted that agency was both much more widespread and much more varied in its aims and activities. However, this did not question the underlying assumption that agency is directed towards liberation, and that it therefore manifests itself in resistance to or subversion of power relations. Hence, Mahmood repeats the initial challenge:

If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes “change” and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, *what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from the progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency* – but one that can only be understood from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Agents need not challenge or resist domination and subjection; they may, on the contrary, submit to, embrace, and find their meaning in subordination. This does not make their acts any less active, or the authors any less agents. Agency has no inherent or internal directedness towards freedom.

If one doubts that Mahmood’s opponent here is real or serious, note that Philip Pettit manifests this very “progressivist” tendency. In the course of arguing that “a person has reason to want” freedom from domination, “no matter what else they want” – a point I endorse below – Pettit asks, “how could anyone fail to want [freedom] for themselves, or fail to recognize it as a value? Short of embracing some religiously or ideologically motivated doctrine of self-abasement, people will surely find their ends easier of attainment to the extent that they enjoy non-domination.”[[24]](#endnote-24) It is invalid to infer from the fact that someone has a reason to want something that they actually do want it, and it is dangerous to imagine a category of religious and ideological fanatics bent on their own subjection. The conjunction of the two claims seems to imply precisely what Mahmood rejects, that every non-pathological agent desires freedom, and, conversely, that whoever does not desire freedom is pathological.

II.

Mahmood’s is, thus, a reasonable corrective to the New Left’s tendency to fall into what Judith Butler once called the “emancipatory model of agency,” according to which political freedom is the immanent telos of an already free will, the realization of the inner tendencies of human agency itself.[[25]](#endnote-25) Despite the value of her intervention, however, it has its own shortcomings. Crucially, Mahmood vacillates in her identification of the relevant background situation of agency. As we have seen, she attributes to the New Left the assumption that “agency is consubstantial with resistance to *relations of domination*.” However, we have also seen that what she wants to deny is the universality of “the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, *norms*.” It should be obvious that ‘norms’ and ‘relations of domination’ are two very different matters, and that resistance to the latter would in no way suggest or entail a desire for freedom from the former.

While Mahmood is certainly right to deny *both* that agency always resists domination *and* that agency is teleologically directed towards freedom from norms, the two denials ought not to be conflated. Agency is opposed to neither domination nor to norms. Nonetheless, the relationship between agency and domination is significantly different from that between agency and norms. Agency is so thoroughly caught up in *norms* that it cannot even be conceived without them. In order for my acts to be recognizable to others – and hence to myself – as acts at all, rather than tics or spasms, they must adhere to norms, protocols, practices.

In response to structuralism, some areas of academia suffered a sort of collective moral panic about this rather prosaic observation, and a flood of writing claimed that the discursive constitution of agency entailed the denial of the possibility of change, the denigration of the human capacity for reflection, and the erasure of freedom, responsibility, and common decency. Mahmood’s argument seems to be caught in a lingering eddy from this flood. As a number of post-structuralist theorists argued, the structure of systems of signification, norms, etc., is not a barrier to agency, but the condition of agency.[[26]](#endnote-26) Agents are not pre-linguistic, pre-social beings, hemmed in by the rules and norms of discourse. Rather than a prison-house, discourse is the force-field within which agency is constituted as agency. Discursive structures are not deterministic causes of action, and neither do they reduce the possibilities of action to a set of choices between inconsequential alternatives. One can subvert or be free from one norm or another, but only by reiterating other norms. Freedom from norms is a dystopia, neither possible nor attractive.

The same cannot be said for relations of domination. There is no intrinsic tie whereby agency requires domination, as it requires norms. I am dominated where I am liable to arbitrary interference from another or others.[[27]](#endnote-27) Where norms are an essential condition of agency, it is reasonable to think that domination is or gives rise to some sort of *impairment* of agency. After all, if I am acting in a condition of domination, it is plausible that I am not acting as I would in the absence of domination. Relations of domination give agents a special set of reasons to consider in their actions: How will my dominator(s) perceive or react to what I am doing? Are they likely use their power to interfere with my action? How? Regardless of what I want to do, a new sort of uncertainty or anxiety hangs over my plans, intentions, and desires. Anything I try to do might come to naught, on the whim of another, and there is nothing I can do about that.

Such relations of domination do not rob me of my agency. Domination is not force; it does not move me from the outside regardless of what I think or want. Rather, it defines the situation within which I think and want and act. It is not the case that a dominated agent *must* – necessarily or normatively – resist domination. Complicity is an overwhelming historical fact, and for good reason: an absolute moral duty to resist domination would be, in most contexts of domination, a duty to forsake one’s own life, and the lives of those one cares about. Domination works precisely by mobilizing prudential and affective concerns against the struggle for freedom. Nor, again, can we say that every dominated agent *desires or prefers* to be free from domination. The desire to be treated well, or to be favoured, is often enough more salient, at least, than the desire to be free, and the preference for doing the best one can under domination is evident from the choices made by most dominated people most of the time.

But what we can say with confidence is that dominated agents *have an interest* in being free of domination. We can say this because it follows from what we said above: no matter what the dominated desire or try to do, no matter where they find their pleasures, being dominated introduces an extraneous uncertainty or anxiety or obstacle into their lives. Hence, the fact that they desire at all – no matter what their desire lights upon – gives the dominated an interest in being free of that extraneous uncertainty burdening their desire.[[28]](#endnote-28) They have a reason to want that dominating power gone. (Having a reason to want something is not the same as wanting it, and does not preclude having other reasons for not wanting the same thing. Thus, having an interest in being free from domination need not mean much; it may conflict with and be outweighed by other interests. We will be able to explore some of these intricacies further on.)

This conclusion is both very much in line with Mahmood’s argument that agency has to be decoupled from resistance and liberation, *and* a challenge to her attempt to suture this argument to a criticism of the “normative” status of freedom for political theory. She claims, for instance, that feminist scholars are prone to identify agency with resistance because of feminism’s “dual character as both an *analytical* and *politically prescriptive* project.” She identifies as a “premise” of all feminism the claim “that where society is structured to serve male interests, the result will be either neglect, or direct suppression, of women’s concerns.” Hence – and this is meant to be a criticism – “freedom is normative for feminism, as it is for liberalism, and critical scrutiny is applied to those who want to limit women’s freedom, not those who want to extend it.”[[29]](#endnote-29) But the diagnosis is faulty. Freedom can remain normative for feminism, in the sense that feminists can affirm that all women have an interest in being free from male domination. This commitment to freedom can serve, moreover, as an analytical postulate for showing how, in concrete situations, male domination frustrates and taxes women’s actually existing desires and projects. And yet none of this implies that all women *want* to be free, or that women’s agency always and everywhere resists their domination. One of the analytical tasks pursued by feminist scholarship, however, is to show that even where women do not *want* to be free of male domination, even where their desires and projects and agency are oriented towards embracing their subordination, male domination still imposes extraneous costs on those very desires and projects.[[30]](#endnote-30)

III.

At this point, I must differentiate my argument in the previous section from Vivek Chibber’s recent criticisms of postcolonial theory. This is necessary in order to avoid a misunderstanding. Although Chibber does not mention Mahmood, he attacks the Subaltern Studies school for, among other things, ruling out appeals to “universal human interests” in the name of cultural particularities, and claims that, without such an appeal, the democratic political project becomes unmoored.[[31]](#endnote-31) Since Mahmood allies her own argument with the Subalternists’ analysis of ‘community,’ and since I have just argued that there is a universal human interest in freedom from domination, it might seem that my criticism of Mahmood tracks Chibber’s critique of the Subalternists. This would mistake my argument, however. Chibber’s attempt to ground democratic politics in universal interests is, I think, confused, for reasons intimately tied to the main themes of this essay.

Like me, Chibber traces the origins of postcolonial studies back to the Marxist humanist project of ‘history from below.’ Thus, it was originally motivated by the ambition “to understand the participation of working people in political culture, not just as dupes of elite designs, or as unthinking mobs, or as the passive recipients of structural pressures, but as active and thinking agents,” and sought “to recover the goals and aspirations of popular groupings, to show that they had real goals and were often pursuing definite interests.”[[32]](#endnote-32) This, at least, seems to have been the project of Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. However, the other Subalternists seem to Chibber to have understood the project differently, as challenging the very notion that the Indian peasant acts on the basis of interests. Hence, according to Partha Chaterjee (according to Chibber), “in cases of peasant action, interests are replaced by duty and obligation,” to such an extent that “peasants are not like other agents – they think differently.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Peasant consciousness is *community* consciousness.

Mahmood seems to agree with Chibber that this is the lesson of Chaterjee’s work. Unlike Chibber, she also seems to endorse the conclusion. She claims that Chaterjee’s notion of ‘community’ “has a certain resonance” with her own conception of ethical practices as “practices of subjectivation,” and that “such an understanding of the ethical in terms of the political, and vice versa, is crucial if we are to understand the power that extra-national forms of belonging currently command in the postcolonial world.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Thus, Mahmood seems to endorse two notions: a) that there are, among postcolonial subjects, forms of community affiliation that displace interests as the basis of action, and b) that, therefore, to understand the practices of the mosque movement as stemming from the interests of the women undertaking those practices would be to misunderstand the practices themselves. Chibber’s attribution of the community-not-interests thesis to postcolonial theory seems to hold up in the case of Mahmood.

Chibber’s analysis goes south, however, as soon as he turns to defending the universality of material interests. To some extent, this is ground I have already covered in the previous section. Chibber claims that by defending universal interests he is denying “that agent’s socialization *entirely constitutes* their practical reasoning,” and affirming instead that “agents have the ability to reflect upon their norms and, when these norms threaten or undermine their well-being, to reject them.”[[35]](#endnote-35) But the constitution of practical reasoning, even were it entire, does not entail anything about our ability to reflect upon norms and reasons for acting. And the fact that I can reflect upon my norms does not mean that I do not obey other norms in my very reflection. Stepping back from any given norm does not require that I step back into a space with no norms whatsoever. As Mahmood very carefully shows, the women of the mosque movement do quite a bit of reflecting, and they do so, in large part, *in the* *discourse of piety*. Chibber collapses the necessary distinction between the class of norms and the individual instances thereof.

Chibber’s attempt “to anchor democratic politics in the bedrock of certain universal human interests” falls prey to the same tendency to conflate. Against Dipesh Chakrabarty’s claim that universal, basic needs cannot be motives for particular actions, Chibber argues that,

It is a precondition to any culture that the social actors who comprise it have found means of sustaining themselves. If agents do not perceive the need to find subsistence, then the elementary precondition for the culture’s existence has not been met. Hence, every culture must have codes through which agents can recognize their basic needs as desires […]. It follows that basic needs not only *can* become reasons, but they *must* become reasons.

This is all reasonable enough, but it does not do the work Chibber thinks it does.

First, Chibber claims that admitting “the simple need for physical well-being [i.e.,] the need to ward off direct bodily harm by others and the need for a livelihood,” suffices to “tie together the political struggles of laboring classes in East and West as part of one […] universal history.”[[36]](#endnote-36) But Chibber cannot have it both ways. The interest in well-being cannot be both universally and trans-historically motivating and the anchor of democratic politics. Chibber has admitted, after all, that every culture – and, hence, every social formation – has presupposed that people can feel and pursue their need for subsistence. People subsisting is the precondition of any society existing, howsoever it might be governed. People’s interest in subsistence, therefore, does not require or recommend democratic politics, or any other sort of politics. Short of self-induced catastrophes, most societies have done a decent job of securing people’s interest in subsistence, as evidenced by the very existence of those societies.

I suspect that Chibber wants to argue, though, that democracy *does a better job* of allowing people to exist and pursue a livelihood than does any other regime. Historically speaking, this is a doubtful claim, both hard to operationalize and counterintuitive. But, more importantly, even if it were true, it would fail to anchor democratic politics in universal human interests for the simple reason that, while each of us has in interest in her own well-being, it doesn’t follow that any of us have an interest in other people’s well-being, much less in everyone’s well-being. Chibber makes the mistake of thinking that if we all have *the same* interest, then we have a *common* interest. Thus, he argues that, since “it is reasonable to assume that social agents typically have the capacity to discern when their basic well-being is being undermined,” “then the centuries-old anchor of the labor movement – that workers everywhere are bound by certain fundamental interests – stands affirmed.”[[37]](#endnote-37) This is obviously fallacious, and the conclusion is mere wishful thinking. Time and time again, the labor movement has been proven to be divided against itself by workers’ fundamental interests.

This is a stumbling-block for any attempt to ground a universalistic politics in the universality of certain interests. I have argued that everyone has an interest in being free from domination. It does not follow, however, that everyone has an interest in everyone being free from domination. Only an interest of the latter sort could satisfactorily ground a universal republican politics. Marx seems to have thought that the modern proletariat had such an interest in universal freedom. Whether a convincing argument can be made for this or not, it at least gets the form of the claim right. It seems untrue, however, to say that *anyone* has an interest in *everyone’s* well-being. Hence, the path to a universalistic and democratic politics seems foreclosed by the universal interest upon which Chibber makes his stand.

Whatever my criticisms of Mahmood, I do not think that her analysis – or that of the Subalternists before her – has, as Chibber fears, unmoored democratic politics. On the contrary, I think that taking seriously the desires and strivings of people, just as they understand those desires and strivings, is fundamental to any non-repressive politics whatsoever. Egyptian democrats ought to take her book, and the women whose lives it portrays, very seriously – not as a threat to democratic or emancipatory politics, but as the beginning of that politics. Emancipatory politics only stands a chance if it can meet up with people’s actual desires, if the case can be made that people, with the desires and values they already have, will be better able to get what they want and live according to their values if liberation movements are successful. Saying, “Don’t you see that it is in your interests (as I have articulated them)?” is not enough.

IV.

But if emancipatory politics requires going among the people, and beginning with their actual desires and life-projects, the same is not true of theory, which must take account of the gap between desires and interests. An interest is only a potential desire, a reason to want something, whether or not one actually wants it. People living under domination, like all people, will be actually motivated by their actual desires and projects. These desires and projects will be informed by their sense of what options are available to them. And, here, in their evaluation of their options, they will encounter those who dominate them not only as obstacles but also as means, conduits, and even objects of desire. Pleasing, cajoling, flattering, tricking, and caring for someone in a dominant position can be more or less effective ways of getting what one wants, and can constitute more or less rational tactics for pursing one’s projects. Because of this some theorists and advocates of emancipation have drawn the conclusion that one cannot expect a person to “be virtuous, who is not free.”[[38]](#endnote-38) As Frederick Douglass put it, “The morality of *free* society can have no application to *slave* society. […] Make a man a slave, and you rob him of moral responsibility.”[[39]](#endnote-39)

This conclusion runs directly counter to Mahmood’s effort to present virtue ethics as an alternative theoretical framework to liberation theory. A careful analysis of the relationship between freedom, responsibility, and virtue reveals that our respect for the ethical or moral agency of people dictates that *before* we can take their own “concepts of human flourishing into account,”[[40]](#endnote-40) we have to, *as theorists*, attend to the institutional context in which they are either free to pursue human flourishing on their own terms or not. Domination systematically distorts human beings’ efforts to flourish. Hence, practices of “ethical formation” and their attendant “architectures of the self” cannot be properly understood except on the condition that we have already answered the question of whether or not the selves in question live under domination, and whether, consequently, the norms and practices that constitute them are responses to servitude or expressions of freedom.

Mahmood does not answer this question. Nor does she provide the sort of account of Egyptian institutions – family law, policing practices, labour practices, incidence of and responses to domestic violence, etc. – that would allow us to answer the question. She does not do either of these things because she does not think they are relevant to her aim of redressing “the profound inability within current feminist political thought to envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of the liberal progressive imaginary.”[[41]](#endnote-41) But human flourishing can only appear where people are free of domination, and this condition of freedom is a *public* fact, something to be discerned by looking at social relations, institutions, and practices. Mahmood is concerned to rebut an imperialist Enlightenment view of freedom as making the right sorts of choices, or making choices in the right way, but she still falls into the project of finding freedom in a sort of self-relation.

Mahmood’s notion of human flourishing is indebted to Claire Colebrook’s understanding of *positive ethics*, itself a concatenation of Aristotle, Pierre Hadot, and the late writings of Foucault on ethics and practices of the self.[[42]](#endnote-42) Hence, she understands the *da’wa* work (proselytizing) undertaken by the Egyptian women she interviews as embodying a “set of ascetic practices” that are “self-monitored,” and that have the aim of producing a life of virtue and piety.[[43]](#endnote-43) These ethical practices have to be appreciated as the lived reality of Islamic discourses and concepts with their own logic and “forms of reasoning,” which, in turn, “must be explored on their own terms if one is to understand the structuring conditions of this form of ethical life and the forms of agency it entails.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

Despite Mahmood’s insistence that this project follows from a disavowal of “the humanist subject” – by which she means what Sharon Krause calls “the sovereign subject,” self-possessed and the author of its own story[[45]](#endnote-45) – hers is very much a humanist project, which seeks to understand people on their own terms, to make apparent the sense of their lives. She seeks out “the meaning of [religious] practices for the mosque participants,” “the ends toward which [an action] was aimed,” and “the significance of [women’s] subordination to the women who embody it.”[[46]](#endnote-46) All of this is undertaken in the hope of purging feminism of the prescriptive drive to make “certain life forms provisional if not extinct.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

This hope is laudable. There is an all-too-common tendency to move from the thought, *I would never freely choose to do that*, to thinking that anyone who does *that* must be forced, coerced, oppressed, or otherwise unfree. Thus, one’s own conviction that one would never freely wear a burqa or a veil becomes the conviction that any woman wearing a burqa or veil must be unfree. This inference is obviously problematic. The heart is an obscure and mysterious place; desire is manifold, and there is no saying what a free person might want.

But a reasonable resistance to this move – which infers a lack of freedom from the *content* of a person’s choices – does not justify the claim that one must enter into a person’s point of view, see the world as she sees it, in order to say whether or not her choices are freely made. This counterclaim preserves the intimate link between the content of choice and freedom. It adds simply that this content must be understood as the agent understands it, rather than as the outside observer and critic understands it. This is a pointless amendment. Freedom does not reside in the content of our choices at all, but in the context in which we choose.

Some would agree that freedom does not reside in the *content* of our choices, but claim instead that it is to be found in their origin, in the procedures by which we came to make them.[[48]](#endnote-48) This seems to me a distinction without a difference. It still locates freedom in individual choices, as if being free were the sum of making a set of choices freely. It still asks us to interrogate the agent and her thought processes in order to find out whether or not her actions proceed from herself, or from some external or unreasonable influence. This turns political theory into depth psychology.

But freedom, oppression, and domination are not in your head. They are not found in the meaning that your acts and situation have for you, or in the thought process by which you arrive at your decisions. They are public. They can be discerned in the institutional practices of the society in which you participate. There is no need for the critic of those practices to ask what these practices *mean* to those who enact them, or how they *view* them, or how they enter into their decision-making. Hence, Mahmood has not, in fact, established that the women she interviewed are engaged in forms of human flourishing. Perhaps they are, but attending to “the mosque participants’ concepts of human flourishing” cannot possibly bring us any closer to establishing that fact.[[49]](#endnote-49) Their lives and practices have significance regardless, of course. Mine is not an argument for degrading or dismissing the experiences and self-understandings of people. But that significance is elsewhere and of a different character than Mahmood claims.

According to Mahmood, it is a “political demand” that impels us “to exercise vigilance against culturalist arguments that seem to authorize practices that underwrite women’s oppression,” and hence to ignore or discredit women’s experiences and self-understandings. What she pleads for is the freedom of “our analytical explorations” to ignore this political demand. She hopes that, “by allowing theoretical inquiry some immunity from the requirements of strategic political action, we leave open the possibility that the task of thinking may proceed in directions not dictated by the logic and pace of immediate political events.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Certainly we should hope for and support a division of labour between theory and political action. Nonetheless, Mahmood assigns to theory the task that is rightly part of political action and vice versa. It is strategic political action that cannot forsake people’s self-understandings and actual desires, lest it both blinker and hobble itself. Politics – especially democratic or emancipatory politics – has to take people as they are. Theory, on the other hand, can safely and effectively remain at some remove from what people actually think and want, content to analyze the social institutions and practices that structure people’s beliefs and desires, and that proceed on their way, at least to some extent, regardless of what people think or want. In its capacity to diagnose systems of domination, political theory cannot be distracted by people’s apparent or real investment in and inhabitation of the forms of life available to them.

V.

To review, this essay has advanced four arguments. First, it has defended Mahmood’s argument against the New Left quest to uncover the agency of the oppressed. In its reaction against Stalinism, Marxist humanism and the New Left identified subaltern agency with resistance to domination, with a desire for a different moral economy. Mahmood rightly points out that agency and desire are not automatically oriented towards liberation, that people may very actively and with full hearts embrace their own subordination as a form of self-care.

However, while Mahmood is right to identify the possible collusion of desire and domination, this essay argues that she mistakes the lesson of this collusion because she conflates being dominated with being immersed in a system of social norms. While desire and agency are always invested in norms, and must be made sense of within these norms, the same is not true of domination or oppression. We may desire our subjection to domination, and our agency may be caught up in this project of subjection, but this does not vacate the thesis that we have a real and identifiable interest in being free of domination. The universality of this interest validates freedom’s normative status for *emancipatory political theory*, including feminist theory.

Contra Vivek Chibber, however, the identification of universal human interests is insufficient to ground a *emancipatory politics*. That each of us has an interest in being free does not entail that we have reciprocal interests in the freedom of others, or a common interest in universal freedom. If Mahmood seems to embrace the Subalternists’ thesis that postcolonial subjects are motived by community rather than by interests, and if Chibber’s criticisms of this thesis are valid, it does not follow that the move to recover identifiable interests has any political payoff. On the contrary, the Subalternist thesis has a political justification, if not a theoretical one. Acknowledging the self-understanding and professed desires of the people whose freedom you support is the *sine qua non* of *emancipatory* politics.

Finally, however, this acknowledgement ought not to be conflated, as Mahmood does, with a theoretical principle according to which the self-understanding or internal logic of forms of life is the last word on those forms of life. People’s desires and projects and self-understandings are simply irrelevant to the question of whether or not those people are dominated or oppressed. This question can only be answered by a theoretical analysis of social relations and institutions, an analysis that stands at arm’s length from the question of how people create meaning out of their situations, whatever they may be. *Emancipatory* political theory and *emancipatory* politics are oriented towards the same end, and are interdependent in the final analysis, but they must proceed by different paths.

1. See, for instance, Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), chap. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” Canto II.lxvii, *The Works of Lord Byron: Including the Suppressed Poems*, ed. J. W. Lake (Philadelphia: H. Adams and J. Grigg, 1831), 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005), 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 5, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. CLR James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 377. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Selma James, *Sex, Race, and Class: The Perspective of Winning, a Selection of Writings 1952-2011* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 288. The phrase, “working-class self-activity,” was coined by George Rawick, a close associate of CLR James; see his “Working Class Self-Activity,” *Radical America* 3, no. 2 (April 1969): 23–31. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 252. Thompson’s essay on “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd” was originally published in 1971. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), chap. 1–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in Guha and Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 58–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Politics of Piety*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Politics of Piety*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Politics of Piety*, 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14–5; my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1997), 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Judith Butler, “For a Careful Reading,” in Seyla Benhabib et al., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, Thinking Gender (New York: Routledge, 1995), 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. For example, Butler: “To claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency” (“Contingent Foundations,” in ibid., 46). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Pettit, *Republicanism*. There is some controversy about how to understand both liability to interference and the condition that the interference must be arbitrary. For my part, I will leave the first undefined for now, but specify that interference (whatever it may be) is arbitrary when it a) originates in another agent, and b) need not be responsive to my protests and concerns. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See Pettit, *Republicanism*, 90-92, for a more extended argument to the effect that freedom from domination is a “primary good.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *Politics of Piety*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Mahmood’s concrete research provides these sorts of analyses, even if she does not draw this conclusion from them. See, for instance, her conversations with Nadia and Sana about the burdens faced by unmarried women in Egypt; *Politics of Piety*, 167–74. Even more pointed is her account of the struggles between Abir and her husband, Jamal, over Abir’s pursuit of da’wa work (ibid., 175–80). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2012), 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 156–7. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 160. I do not vouch the accuracy of Chibber’s reading. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 178–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 236. As she writes earlier in chap. 9: “It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are, to some degree, independent of men […]. Whilst they are absolutely dependent upon their husbands, they will be cunning, mean, and selfish” (*ibid*., 230-1). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. John David Smith, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 140.. Eric MacGilvray has claimed that “republican thought centers around the problem of securing the practice of virtue through the control of arbitrary power” (*The Invention of Market Freedom* [Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 22). I wish to insist only that this political problem is a real one, with a long pedigree, not that it is the republican problem. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Claire Colebrook, “Ethics, Positivity, and Gender: Foucault, Aristotle, and the Care of the Self,” *Philosophy Today* 42, no. 1 (1998): 40–52. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 187. See Sharon Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 166, 180, 188. These goals resonate with, for example, Nancy Hirschmann’s articulation of the questions we must ask about the freedom of others; see *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. For instance, see John Christman’s work on autonomy; e.g., “Liberalism and Individual Positive Freedom,” *Ethics* 101, no. 2 (January 1, 1991): 343–59. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 195–6. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)