



SWEDISH
COLLEGIUM
for ADVANCED STUDY

PLENARY SESSION # 6

Saturday, 18 February. 10:50 – 12:20. Room: IHC – Stein Auditorium

Session: The Future of Secularisms

Chair: Zuya Hasan, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

Secularism after Western Hegemony

Rajeev Bhargava, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi

We Have Never Been Secular — And Are Unlikely to Become So

John Bowen, Washington University in St. Louis, MO

TBA

Achin Vanaik, University of Delhi

ABSTRACTS

Secularism after Western Hegemony

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If by ‘secular’ we refer to legally implemented notions of separation, then even the ideal-typical cases—post-1905 France, Jeffersonian America—fail to meet the criteria. Perhaps we have asked the wrong question, and should ask instead about the generation of particular regimes of governing religions, along with the ideologies that accompany these regimes.

We then would also wish to ask: ‘What should we (normatively) ask of such regimes of governance?’ And: ‘How do we (empirically) account for the trajectories each such regime takes?’ And, on a meta-level: ‘Are there criteria that permit comparison of such regimes?’

I take a partially skeptical position. On the one hand, I argue that ‘equity’ or even-handedness provides one workable empirical/normative criterion across many (all?) such cases, allowing us to usefully ask: ‘How is even-handedness understood and practiced in countries x, y, and z?’

But I am not sure there are other such criteria (and would welcome candidates). Rather, I argue that country-specific histories of creating bounding between spheres (such as ‘public’ versus ‘religious’) have created empirical/normative criteria of such embedded specificity that it makes little sense to contrast the key ideas or the philosophies of two countries. Nor would it then be useful to ask questions of the form: ‘How does secularism differ between France and Britain’, as if there were an object called ‘secularism’ that exists in both countries and that explains each country’s knowledge and practices.

It would be more useful, on this view, to ask: ‘What processes and memories are embedded in institutions and disguised by ideologies in France, or in Britain, regarding the governance of religions.’ In some cases national intellectuals are the worst guides to these particularities, insofar as they invoke the ideologies as if they adequately summed up the histories.

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