It is an honour for me to respond to these interesting and diverse responses to my essay, ‘Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time’. There are many strands to the paper, and my interlocutors appropriately point out where some of them might be further woven. They underscore as well some need for distinction and elaboration that strike me as very right or, indeed, ‘spot on’. I’d like to make use of this opportunity to think further about some of the more general issues raised by these responses to do with the appropriate framework for analyses of this kind. One question is whether the frameworks of pluralism, rights-based discourses, and multiculturalism can address the full range of issues introduced by the appropriation of a discourse on sexual freedom for the purposes of anti-immigrant politics; another pertains to the question of whether an alliance between sexual and religious minorities is possible.

I would like to begin by citing Chetan Bhatt’s remark that ‘in sociology, cultural theory or cultural studies, many of us assume a field of truths . . . a (albeit contested) field of theoretical intelligibility for understanding or describing “Self”, “Other”, the subject, identity, culture’ (Bhatt 2008: 28). He remarks as well, ‘I am no longer sure these concepts necessarily have the expansive capacity to speak to the massive transformations of life-worlds outside Euro America, the rapid unscrambling and repackaging of what we call “identity” . . . ’ (Bhatt 2008: 29).

If Bhatt is right, then how do we proceed within a framework of multiculturalism or human rights that seems to presume specific kinds of subjects who are characterized as belonging to certain kinds of cultural identities – ethnic, religious, gendered, sexual, etc. Can we, however, think about what recognition might be in such a way that seriously takes into account the challenge to notions of the subject and identity proposed by Chetan Bhatt? We might try to answer this question by considering two paths marked out in these responses. The first belongs to Tariq Modood, who seeks to extend a doctrine of recognition for thinking about the possibilities of ‘coalitional possibilities
between sexual politics and religious multiculturalism’ (Modood 2008: 47). For Modood, citizenship has to be understood as dynamic and revisable, as ‘conversations and re-negotiations’ (Modood 2008: 49). He makes clear that ‘the one thing that civic inclusion does not consist of is an uncritical acceptance of an existing conception of citizenship, of “the rules of the game” and a one-sided “fitting-in” of new entrants or the new equals (the ex-subordinates)’ (Modood 2008:49). And then he makes this important addition to his remarks: ‘To be a citizen, no less than to have just become a citizen, is to have a right to not just be recognized but to debate the terms of recognition’ (Modood 2008: 49).

At the same time that Modood offers a compelling version of recognition that exceeds the usual liberal recourse to ‘respect’, he lays claim to certain notions of identity without which the practice of recognition cannot proceed. He sketches the scenario in which ‘homosexuals and Muslims’ (Modood 2008: 48) can and do tolerate each other in the spheres of public transaction and policy, but he distinguishes between limited public tolerance and a more robust conception of recognition. It is in relation to this latter concept that certain problems arise regarding the available categories we have for thinking about the subject. What, for instance, would be ‘recognized’? Is it the ‘homosexuality’ of the gay person? The religious belief of the Muslim? If recognition requires culturally legible subject formations, then must we operate within a stabilized set of discourses in order for recognition to succeed? If recognition proves to be successful in so far as it reconsolidates the ‘sexual subject’, the ‘cultural subject’ and the ‘religious subject’, among others, does it do this as a simplifying effect of its own discursive operation, or is actually ‘recognizing’ the complexity of contemporary conflicts? What if the very terms that are ‘recognizable’ prove to rely on a failure of recognition? We might here invoke Bhatt in relation to Modood. Do ‘these concepts necessarily have the expansive capacity to speak to the massive transformations of life-worlds outside Euro America, the rapid unscrambling and repackaging of what we call “identity” . . . ’ (Bhatt 2008: 30)?

In a different register, Linda Woodhead makes the case for rethinking rights discourse, arguing against an exclusively individualist matrix for the conceptualization of rights and elaborating on ‘associational rights’. In her review of feminist criticisms of multiculturalism, we can see how easily terms like ‘identity’ and ‘culture’ are stabilized and put to work in favour of existing frameworks. If the problem we are addressing is one in which the rights of culture threaten to trump rights of individual freedom, then we have already accepted a framing of the problem that refuses to rethink the very concepts of the individual and of culture that are presumed. But Woodhead offers an important insight, namely, that religious networks of support are often necessary for those who lack privilege, and that the effort of secular elites to exclude religion from the public sphere is based in a certain class privilege and
blindness to this important resource. She points out that although religion can ‘legitimate and normalize infringements of rights, it also forms the cords of a network of mutual support for vulnerable people’ (Woodhead 2008: 56). Woodhead makes the case for the associational rights of religious communities, the infringement of which leads to further disenfranchisement for such communities or, indeed, the deracination of community itself. In this context, we can see that the invocation of rights has effects that can only be understood within a larger map of power, suggesting that a rights discourse must be fully situated in order to understand its ultimate political uses and values.

Is the conclusion to this analysis that we ought to develop a framework that includes both individual and associational rights? And would that be similar to the bid by Modood to develop a more comprehensive account of recognition in which certain kinds of impasses are overcome? Both of these projects might be understood to expand existing democratic norms in ways that make them more inclusive and that seek to overcome ‘stand-offs’ between individual and religious claims and rights. One joke that comes to mind is that the concept of the ‘individual’ on which the stand-off depends is itself formed in part through very concrete ‘individualizing’ religious traditions, Protestantism probably the most efficacious among them. But that joke will have to wait for another time. In this context, I wish only to draw attention to the tension between (a) expanding the existing normative concepts of citizen, recognition, and rights to accommodate and overcome contemporary impasses and (b) calling for alternative vocabularies grounded in the conviction that the normative discourses derived from liberalism and multiculturalism alike are inadequate to the task of grasping new formations of the subject and new forms of social and political antagonism.

To these alternatives I want to add a third, namely, that we cannot take impasses for granted, however prevalent the construal of a certain ‘stand-off’ is between religious and sexual minorities. There are numerous religious gay and lesbian groups, and they have been responsible for some of the pro-marriage agendas in the USA. There are existing coalitions of queers and ‘illegal aliens’ in the USA and across Europe that work together without questions of sexual identity and religious belief at the forefront of their coalitional efforts. There are numerous networks of Muslim lesbians and gays (e.g. the Kreuzberg Bar, SO36, in Berlin) that undo the opposition as a necessary one. And yet, the terms of multiculturalism and recognition politics often require a reduction of the subject to a single defining attribute, a metaphysics of the subject that does a certain violence to cross-cutting valences of power that inform global subject formations.

However, when the above-mentioned networks form the basis of political coalitions, they are bound together less by matters of ‘identity’ or forms of recognition tied to existing notions of identity than by forms of political opposition to certain state and other regulatory policies that effect exclusions,
abjections, partially or fully suspended citizenship, subordination, debasement, and the like. So one part of my view is simply that ‘coalitions’ are not necessarily based on subject positions or on reconciling differences among subject positions; indeed, there can be – perhaps must be – active antagonisms among coalitional members. Most important, however, is that coalitions are based on a critical recognition of how power operates to break up or foreclose certain kinds of coalitional efforts among the stateless, the abject, the underprivileged, and the excluded. Of course, I do not mean for ‘forms of power’ to have unilateral and effective power, but I do think that we have to be able to understand how certain kinds of impasses are orchestrated, exacerbated, extracted from context, and rendered essential if we are to develop a critical relation to them. I am not at all convinced that there is one ‘unifying’ term to cover all the forms of dispossession that link minority politics, nor do I think there needs to be one for the strategic purposes of political alliance. What is necessary is that those engaged in such coalitional efforts be actively involved in thinking through the category of the ‘minority’ as it crosses the lines that divide citizen from non-citizen. By focusing on state and regulatory powers, on how they orchestrate debate and craft the terms for political impasse, we move beyond the framework that presumes dyadic opposition or which extracts a ‘conflict’ from a complex formation in such a way that occludes both the orchestrating and coercive dimensions of power. By bringing the question of power into the centre of the debate, the terms of the debate are bound to change and, indeed, to become more politically responsive.

So, in the first instance, I ask about how forms of power, some of which are state power, orchestrate dyadic opposition as a way of deflecting critical attention to the operations of power itself. In the second instance, I caution against narrative forms of progressive history in which dyadic conflict is either (a) overcome through more encompassing and inclusive liberal progressive frameworks or (b) turned into the defining battle for liberalism itself. In the former, we develop more inclusive frameworks to solve the antagonism; in the latter, we claim that the secular and progressive alternative is the *sine qua non* of liberal democracy, and we declare effective war on any efforts to rethink the necessity, sufficiency, and ultimate value of that framework. The first characterizes dialectical, pragmatist, and progressive notions of history; the second makes the ‘progressive’ into a pole of conflict that casts all non-secular vocabularies and all efforts to uncover or develop alternative vocabularies as threats to existing liberalism that must be debunked and defeated. Suki Ali is right to point out that a certain version of sexual politics has been bound up with so-called ‘progressive’ views. I would only note here that we have to consider how the regulation of sexuality is bound up with the reproduction of the nation-state that considers the regulation of sexuality as not necessarily the prescription of compulsory heterosexuality. The production of the paradigmatically ‘free’ gay person is instrumentalized to ratify a war on religious
minorities only because sexuality is understood exclusively as a personal freedom rather than as a network of regulatory power. Sexual torture within out-sourced US prisons has to be understood in this regard, not only as an example of power, but also as articulating a certain conception of ‘sexual freedom’ that is instrumental to the accomplishment of military goals. Once we rethink sexual freedom as the possibility of resistance within coercive and regulatory networks of power, we have a fully different framework for thinking about the invocation of sexual rights – and then we can see how a critical queer politics of contemporary global conditions will distinguish itself from notions of sexual freedom which rely on ‘individual’ rights that paradoxically represent national interests, that are regularly recruited and exploited by the civilizational projects informing contemporary military power.

In any case, it is important to rethink secular time in relation to sexual politics, if only because homosexuality is invoked to confirm versions of historical progress that produce an ‘outside’ to history that is not only, in its Hegelian version, reserved for the entire African continent, but that now pertains to all global formations that cannot be readily assimilated into the dominant norms of Euro-American self-definition. This does not mean that we set aside questions of sexual politics, but only that we insist on an alliance between sexual politics and just efforts to reinstitute global power that oppose that hegemony. I am not at all sure we need to agree on matters of identity, or even questions of reason and modernity in order to proceed with such alliances. They are, in my view, invariably fractious and necessary, emerging both from enduring differences and irreversible interdependencies.

I appreciate Beckford’s point that in France certain minority religious movements ‘can be categorized as, by definition, opposed to freedom and reason’ (Beckford 2008: 44). He is right to point out as well the rather stark difference between how the separation of church and state is formulated in France and in the USA. It is true that the USA protects religious organizations from the state, whereas in France the state is generally protected from religions. But this opposition, as important as it is, may be overstated and may well occlude another major point of contention. After all, the US constitutional jurisprudence has been for the most part devoted to keeping religious prayer out of public schools, a movement that is clearly consonant with French laïcité. And we might also say that as much as France opposes the appearance of religious symbolism within public schools, it supports a notion of the secular that emerges quite clearly from certain religious traditions and which often shares key properties with those traditions. My argument is meant to underscore the theological structure and force, for instance, of certain ideas of ‘culture’ that draw upon Catholic precedents and reintroduce them into the very idea of the secular. The secular is not as ‘pure’ as it claims to be, and when it does claim to be ‘pure’ we might do well to ask: from what religious traditions does that model of purity derive?
I certainly do not imagine a ‘seamless’ alliance between religious and sexual minorities. There are existing alliances, and so it makes sense to ask how they are formed. And it also makes sense to assume that antagonism may well form a continuing feature of such alliances. My point is that such alliances are not necessarily between subject positions or identitarian claims, but may be based on criticisms of state violence, the circumscription of the public sphere, the differential of powers that are enacted through prevalent notions of ‘culture’, and the instrumentalization of rights claims for political purposes that run contrary to the critical efforts to rethink the very terms of coercion and enfranchisement for these times. Whether we expand our existing frameworks or allow them to be interrupted by new vocabularies will determine, in part, how well we consult both the past and future for our present-day critical practices.

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Bibliography


