

Secularity

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Secularity should be understood as a symbolic order that structures the relationships between religious and secular domains in a given society as well as the boundaries between them. These domains have institutional and cultural dimensions and are made up of objects, discursive practices, taken-for-granted assumptions and imaginaries designated as secular or religious. Secularity is then a term encompassing the religious-secular binary and built upon discourses and practices, which deploy this distinction. This understanding is in line with, and inspired by, sociological theories of social differentiation. But rather than ahistorically given it treats the boundaries between religion and secular domains as historically produced and contested.

Secularity is an outcome of (some kind of) processes of *secularization*. It may be underpinned and legitimized through ideologies of *secularism*. The more contested the boundaries between religious and secular domains are or have been in the past, the more likely it is that ideologies of secularism play a major role in terms of public discourses of state legitimizations of sovereignty (see the case of France for example). We deem the distinction between secularity and secularism crucial as their conflation, especially in political theory and comparative politics, masks differences between critiques of ideology and facts.

In our understanding, the term secularity is broader than secularism in two ways. First, while secularism is often taken to designate sets of relationships between religion and the state or the political sphere, secularity points to the relationships between religion and other social spheres as well. We would talk of “the secularity of arts”, “the secularity of science”. Second, secularity is broader because it also points to distinctions between religion and its others that remain discursively “subdued”. We may find that religion is key for expressing national or cultural identities thereby foreclosing public elaborations on secular spaces but that distinctions of religion and its other are differently configured.

Secularity emerges in response to divergent historical situations in which given arrangements regarding the place of religion in the public sphere are questioned and challenged. Challenges may be caused by the need to incorporate religious newcomers and to organize diversity or by the redefinition of religion's role in moments of political change. These historical conflicts and the ways in which they are stored in collective memories are significant in that they define what is "at stake" in contemporary contestations. As a consequence, secularity is premised upon structures of historical meaning. Especially where there develops a dominant model we would speak of secularity in its national or regional expression; e.g. East German secularity etc.

The "Multiple Secularities" Research Project

This research project develops a conceptualization of secularity with a view towards a comparative cultural sociology of secularization. It is inspired by the "multiple modernities" paradigm. The main assumption is that the multiple forms of secularity are specific historical problematizations and need to be understood in terms of their formation through histories of entanglement and interconnectedness.

We work with a conceptual, preliminary typology that includes four models defined by 1) the problem secularity is supposed to address, 2) the leitmotif that shapes it. We have called these models 1) secularity for the sake of "progress", 2) secularity for the sake of individual liberties, 3) secularity for the sake of accommodating religious difference through pluralism, 4) secularity for the sake of the autonomy of other social domains/spheres/subsystems.

In the light the conceptualization explicated above we work to reconstruct the cases of India, the United States, the Netherlands and South Africa.

For more information see www.multiple-secularities.de and <http://multiple-secularities.de/docs/MS.pdf>