Political Theology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ypot20

Migrants in the profane: critical theory and the question of secularization

by Peter E. Gordon, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020, 208 pages, $35.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-3002-5076-3.

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To cite this article: Sid Simpson (2021) Migrants in the profane: critical theory and the question of secularization, Political Theology, 22:4, 350-352, DOI: 10.1080/1462317X.2021.1917223

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.1917223

POLITICAL THEOLOGY
2021, VOL. 22, NO. 4, 350–362

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEWS

Migrants in the profane: critical theory and the question of secularization, by Peter E. Gordon, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020, 208 pages, $35.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-3002-5076-3.

The Frankfurt School's considerable indebtedness to Marx's historical materialism and Weber's reflections on the "disenchantment of the world" make for an unexpected critical resource for thinking through the question of secularization. In *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization*, Peter E. Gordon finds in Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno distinct attempts to theorize how modern secularization required religion's transformation rather than its mere disappearance. As Adorno explained in a 1963 letter to Gershom Scholem; "Nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed; every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane" (111–112).

The book, adapted from Gordon's 2017 Franz Rosenzweig Lectures in Jewish Thought at Yale University, interrogates each of the three Frankfurt School critical theorists' approach to theology. First is Benjamin, whose well known thesis on history and Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* already betrays the uneasy admixture of theology and historical materialism at the center of his thought. Gordon looks to Benjamin's image of the undefeatable chess-playing mechanical Turk as a cipher for his position on theology. Though it appeared to function by virtue of its ingenious technical creation, the automaton in truth concealed a human operator. In Benjamin's reading, the mechanical puppet is "historical materialism," while the hidden flesh and blood operator is "theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight."[1] In other words, Benjamin contends that an extra-historical concept of the messianic animates historical materialism, and paradoxically renders secularization a process of theological concealment rather than disappearance. This is no *genuine* messianism but rather what Benjamin calls a "*weak* messianic power": a dialectical transformation of theology that animates motivation to revolution. On this basis, Gordon declares Benjamin a theorist of "ambivalent secularization, poised in indecision between Marxism and messianism" (53). Gordon's worry, however, is that an appeal to an extra-historical principle that escapes critical scrutiny risks devolving into Schmittian decisionism.

In Gordon's mind, Horkheimer's position on the role of theology transformed greatly throughout his life. The young Horkheimer dismissed any metaphysical considerations outside of material history, theological or otherwise. The older Horkheimer who co-authored with Adorno *Dialectic of Enlightenment* held a more ambivalent view: that Judaism "signified both an emancipatory principle opposed to the world-immanence of myth and a model for world-transcendent reason whose appearance marked an inaugural state in the dialectic of enlightenment" (145). On his view, monotheism became Janus-faced in modernity: it represented an alternative to the instrumental rationality that structured the emergence of Western subjectivity, despite its formative role in that history. Later still, this ambivalence would ultimately give way to a straightforward appeal to theology as "a final refuge for critical resistance to the supremacy of the merely given" (93). That theism alone sustained "the longing for something other than this world" (89) was trouble for Horkheimer's commitment

[1]Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1955. 253.

to dialectical materialism. An appeal to extra-historical theology risked reifying a moment of false transcendence outside of history. Gordon argues that both Benjamin and Horkheimer remained captive to the anxiety of a moral deficit in the wake of the disenchantment of the world, constantly drawn back to a tense and potentially contradictory marriage of Marxism and theology.

Whereas Benjamin and Horkheimer attempted to preserve some form of theology through the process of secularization, Adorno contends that theology can only survive modernity after a "ruthless [rücksichtslosen] migration into the profane" (104). By reading Adorno against Maimonides, Gordon argues that Adorno endorses a form of *negative* theology. Crucially, Adorno does not see this position as a genuinely theological point of view. Rather, he writes that this negative theology is a conceptual vantage point on history that allows us to identify moments of negativity within modernity *as if* from outside, or as he calls it, "from the standpoint of redemption" (131). What matters is the critical force that the concept of theology provides, rather than the content of theology itself. Adorno writes in the final lines of *Minima Moralia*: "Beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters."[2]

While Gordon admits that there is a considerable argument to be made that Adorno is thoroughly secular in his use of theology, he nevertheless argues that the distinction between the theological and secular is blurry at best. In his view, Adorno's negative theology is less a departure from theology than its culmination. That is, we must "salvage the redemptive content of theology, but only in a new form of metaphysical experience that also subjects theology itself to unrelenting criticism" (139). In a characteristically dialectical move, Adorno resists the urge to affirm theology, as Benjamin and Horkheimer appeared perilously close to doing, but instead preserves its normative truth by overcoming its content entirely. It is for this reason that Gordon writes that "negative theology completes itself in negative dialectics" (140).

Migrants in the Profane closes by reframing Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno as thinkers deeply invested in the question of secularization despite their Marxian and Weberian bone fides. On their view, secularization meant religion's concealment and transformation, rather than its mere disappearance. While Benjamin and Horkheimer appealed to a concealed theology as a way to address modernity's moral deficit, the price they paid was risking their historical materialism. Adorno, on the other hand, dissolved the categories of Weber's normative deficit argument by transforming negative theology into negative dialectics. However, in doing so Adorno paid the opposite price: preserving theology at the cost of evacuating it of its theological meaning. While Gordon succeeds in portraying theology as a critical part of the early Frankfurt School's attempt to theorize Western modernity, the reader will no doubt be left with two broad questions: where does Gordon's analysis leave us on the question of secularization? And where does it leave us with respect to the first generation of the Frankfurt School? Regarding the former, Gordon's argument would have us find a difference between the standard Weberian secularization thesis and the Frankfurt School's dialectical concept of secularization, in which "religion does not altogether vanish; rather, its normative contents survive even as they are compelled to undergo a migration into the profane" (144). If, however, the normative force of theology "completes itself in negative dialectics," it seems fair to ask whether or not this process is still effectively the disappearance of religion, albeit with a couple more dialectical steps. Regarding the latter question, Gordon's analysis opens up new questions that we might pose for the first Frankfurt School thinkers, such as: if, as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argues, "freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment

[2]Adorno, Theodor. *Minima Moralia.* New York: Verso, 1951 [2005]. 247.

thinking,"[3] is it also inseparable from a transformed theology? That *Migrants in the Profane* attracts these further questions is, of course, a testament to the timeliness and incisiveness of Gordon's analysis, which will no doubt be of interest to theologians and critical social theorists alike.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.1917223

What's wrong with rights?, by Nigel Biggar, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, 384 pp., £ 30.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780198861973

Nigel Biggar's latest book on human rights is really two sets of essays, in some tension with each other—and one of them far more credible, with some modifications that undermine the project on which he has embarked.

A professor of theological ethics at the University of Oxford, Biggar has prior work on just war theory to his name, and is best known lately for defending the "positive contributions" of the British empire. The first, longer section of his new compilation (nine chapters) argues that there are no moral or natural rights, only moral obligations and some legally defined rights. The second part (three essays) mounts a critique of some recent interpretations, from activists and especially from judges, of those legal rights, emphasizing the British scene, in its growing relationship to European human rights law.

Biggar's exposition in the book is highly peculiar, commenting on the views of others *in extenso* for much of the book, as if he never fully made the authorial move from reckoning with the enormous literature on these topics (the English-language parts of which Biggar has dutifully read) to composing a more straightforward intervention. "Some might find this pedestrian," he comments, in self-defense, "and, again, wonder where the argument is." As a result, Biggar forces readers in search of originality—or even what he thinks might fall in that category—to wait for nearly half the book.

There are morally objective values, Biggar eventually insists, in the first set of essays; it is just that rights do not figure among them. Rather, rights are best understood as legal conventions of a certain sort. Legal entitlements are never absolute and are contained in relation to "the common good" (however defined), as well as to countervailing interests, including the entitlements of others. Biggar cites Edmund Burke to his defense. But what this kind of argument fails to show is why moral rights would not be susceptible of proper specification, especially if legal rights are. That could only be true if the *process* of institutionalizing our values in law was decisive and, indeed, exclusive for determining the shape and scope of entitlements in particular. If anything is morally objective, it is unclear why rights are not. And

[3]Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1945 [2002]. Xvi.